

Chapter 5: Bridging Workforce Gaps: Hiring People with Disabilities through Local and Regional Collaboratives

Profiled in this chapter:

- Star Chamber: The New Bedford Chamber of Commerce Supported Employment Network
- The Start on Success Program in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- Project SEARCH and the Cincinnati Ohio Model

This chapter profiles three local or regionally established collaborative projects that have achieved national reputations for being successful in brokering and developing job opportunities for individuals with disabilities and meeting employer workforce needs. At the heart of their success is the presence of an essential, trusted, and managed private-public partnership. Initiatives such as Cincinnati's Project SEARCH and Pittsburgh's Start on Success have been embraced as national models and are being replicated in other locations across the nation. Both programs primarily serve younger adults. These, and other profiles in this report, beg the question: What is required for partnerships to succeed over the long term? When asked why the New Bedford model has never been replicated in other areas, former Chamber President Jim Mathes noted, "Working together well is the most critical element of a partnership. Why isn't this done more? People get territorial. It requires different systems to work together. It is a team effort, but people don't often work well together."

The three profiles in this chapter provide analysts, advocates, and employers with the operational details and first-person accounts that reveal the inner workings of successful public-private "to work" initiatives. In each profile, the importance of employers having a single point of contact and the presence of a hands-on administrator providing communication and support across all partners is identified.

The profiles demonstrate that internships and on-the-job training are formative for participants, and require collaboration and unified management from the partners. Business leadership makes a difference in each profiled partnership. Participating employers live up to their commitments. They also contribute space and resources, adding the resources that

make the difference in keeping an operation functioning smoothly. The projects are market driven, as participants become valued employees. However, the projects also demonstrate that effective corporate partners share a sense of social mission and responsibility in going the extra mile to invest in and support an underemployed, underrepresented population. The outcomes of these projects confirm one of the most important findings of this report: when given training and basic job support, people with disabilities perform to a high level of employer satisfaction. They get the job done.

Star Chamber: The New Bedford Chamber of Commerce Supported Employment Network

Introduction

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and employers that have benefited from its efforts, the success of the New Bedford, Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce's Supported Employment Network is based upon the Chamber's ability as a business organization to communicate to employers that hiring people with disabilities is a good business decision. The Chamber coordinates a network of agencies that provide employment services for people with disabilities that has been able to successfully match local employer workforce needs with an expanded labor pool of qualified employees with disabilities. The outcomes of the New Bedford initiative have been impressive. Network members provide supports to 289 employees with disabilities at 163 diverse employers in the New Bedford Area.⁷¹ This profile outlines how a regional Chamber of Commerce bridged the gap between employers and public-sector providers in order to meet the workforce needs of member employers and was able to create good paying, permanent jobs for people with disabilities.

"A Group of Good People" — The 1980s Taskforce

In the early 1980s, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation approached the New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce to collaborate in the creation of a summer program designed to enhance work search assistance activities for individuals with disabilities. Today, the collaboration has evolved into a year-round partnership with the Chamber, the Department of Developmental Services (formerly the Department of Mental Retardation), and several area organizations.

Finding and keeping good workers are among the greatest challenges facing businesses in the 21st century. Today, more than ever, businesses need access to a skilled and diverse workforce. They cannot stay competitive and increase profitability without qualified personnel.

People with disabilities are a source of qualified workers that is frequently overlooked. This pool of workers represents one of the largest groups seeking employment in today's market — some 9 million unemployed Americans with significant disabilities want to work.⁷²

U.S. Chamber of Commerce

The public sector and community provider team had all worked with adults and students with disabilities and shared a goal of improving work supports and job access for people with disabilities. This group included representatives from the local Arc, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation (now known as the Department of Developmental Services), the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, the area Office for Job Partnerships, the New Bedford Chamber of Commerce, the local university disabled students office, special education directors and teachers, and other local disability support providers.

The early conversations considered employment options for youth and young adults with disabilities ages 14 to 25. At the time, the Department of Mental Retardation operated small initiatives in supported employment, as well as a traditional sheltered workshop and other day programs. The Department's support of the Supported Employment Network was part of its efforts to expand employment opportunities for the people it serves. The Department's current mission is "to support individuals with intellectual disabilities to fully and meaningfully participate in their communities as valued members."⁷³ Further, the Department now believes that "individual employment in the community is the preferred goal" for the people it serves.⁷⁴

The group called itself the Young Adult Vocational Training Taskforce, and sought to improve education and cooperation among local school systems, families, and employers. In 1988, the taskforce learned of a funding opportunity, and developed a request in collaboration with the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (the state vocational rehabilitation agency) to create a position at the New Bedford Chamber of Commerce to expedite employment for people with disabilities. The group believed the grant would help families by reducing stress for families with young adults with disabilities living at home. It was thought that efforts to facilitate real employment options would meaningfully support families and provide an outlook that would not be limited to sheltered employment or day habilitation. Phil Tully, Director of the New Bedford Area Department of Developmental Services office, noted, "We got a group of good people together and they came up with this."

At that time, the Chamber of Commerce was led by Jim Mathes, who already had collaborated with state agencies and school districts on various projects to help youth and people with disabilities. While not all Chambers engage in these kinds of activities, he saw them as a way to lift the entire community. He wanted his work at the Chamber to be relevant to both the businesses and the community. When Mr. Mathes was approached with this idea, he did not know much about the topic, and spent time learning the field. He noted, "This effort simply made sense. I had seen that people with disabilities were...hardworking and loyal employees. I had seen that the people in sheltered workshops could do stuff despite being lower functioning. It made sense economically and it made people's lives better." Mr. Mathes also knew that the Chamber was key to engaging businesses, as the Chambers are the "club of businesses."

In August 1988, the grant award went to the Chamber, which hired a professional staff member to coordinate the Supported Employment Network. One of the early activities included creation of a summer jobs program for youth with disabilities. Over time, as school-

based supports in the area improved, the network focused more on employment for adults with intellectual disabilities.

How the Partnership Bridged the Gap

The Supported Employment Network is currently comprised of 10 local provider agencies from the workforce, vocational rehabilitation, developmental disabilities, and mental health systems that provide supported employment services to job seekers with disabilities. The network agencies provide work search assistance and employment supports (such as job coaching and transportation) that people with disabilities may need to be gainfully employed.⁷⁵ Joanne Rego, an employee of the Chamber, serves as coordinator and chairs monthly meetings of the network. She facilitates communication with the Chamber's employer membership and "discussion regarding current employment opportunities and successful job placement strategies for persons with disabilities."⁷⁶ The network agencies receive valuable information on meeting local employer needs that expands employment opportunities for the people they serve and employers have easy access to an expanded labor pool of qualified employees with disabilities.⁷⁷

The largest roles the Chamber plays in promoting the network are stressing business benefits and encouraging communication within the network. For example, businesses have responded positively to information about the federal tax benefits associated with hiring workers with disabilities. The New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce is extremely active in promoting network events. These efforts include:

- A section in the Chamber's monthly newsletter, entitled *Enterprising Minds*, which features success stories, lists upcoming network events, and reinforces the business benefits of participating in the Supported Employment Network.
- A video entitled *Supported Employment: Make it Work for You!*, which is presented in an employer-to-employer perspective, featuring area business leaders discussing their positive experiences with hiring workers with disabilities.
- A monthly forum for representatives of the organizations that provide employment supports, which offers an opportunity for staff of these organizations to reflect on practices and share ideas. The monthly network meetings are seen as critical, especially when multiple provider agencies have placed people with a single employer or know of an employer's need for a worker that the provider cannot fill.
- Network-sponsored "Business After Hours" socials at a Chamber member establishment.
- An informational brochure on supported employment, which is mailed to all Chamber members.

- The Chamber informs members of the network of local businesses that are new, coming to the area, or expanding. If the local economic development agency is aware of future hiring, that information is given to Ms. Rego, who distributes it to the local provider agencies.⁷⁸

Early implementation of the network showed great promise, despite some skepticism from both the service provider and business communities. As predicted by Jim Mathes, once people with disabilities were hired, the feedback from Chamber members was overwhelmingly positive. They were hired for real jobs and most people hired performed well. Shawn O'Hara of O'Hara Mazda employs two workers with disabilities, and noted, "I don't look at it as doing anything special. I look at it as something I should do. Their work productivity is fantastic. One is a workhorse." Hiring persons with disabilities was never presented as a charitable service to the community, even though some employers also report feeling satisfaction over providing opportunities for disenfranchised people.

According to Mr. Mathes, other employers stated how happy they were, which resulted in business-to-business connections that led to further hiring. He noted, "One woman said in clear terms that the person with disabilities was her best employee based on every aspect of the employee's performance. Always on time, never slacked off, was productive, and had a positive attitude. Over the years, I've always had something with every employee I've ever had except her." The program quickly became relevant to the members who became involved, the employee, and the employee's family. Mr. Mathes said, "It reflected well on my Chamber. We provided them with a valuable service and in the community."

As a result of the efforts of the New Bedford Chamber of Commerce, the local economic development agency hired an individual with disabilities. Matt Morrissey, the Director of the New Bedford Economic Development Council, stated that it was important for his organization to participate as a model employer, communicating the value of persons with disabilities in the workplace. Morrissey noted that hiring a person with disabilities fit well into the mission of an economic development agency, which is not just to create jobs, but also to serve the health of the community.

A focus on issues related to disability might be uncommon for a Chamber, current New Bedford Chamber of Commerce Director Roy Nascimento noted. But this commitment aligns with more recent concerns of Chambers across the nation related to workforce development. "We are involved in workforce development initiatives and this fits in nicely with our efforts to help employers find qualified workers," he stated.

Funding for the Network Coordination

Funding for the coordinator position does not occur as a direct contract between the Chamber and the local office of the Department of Developmental Services. Rather, funding is given to the local provider agencies and the Chamber of Commerce bills the agencies for the time. Stability of funding is a great concern in this economic climate. As noted by one participant, “One concern is convincing the state that it is worth long-term funding.”

While it is recognized that all employees are different and people with disabilities need to be seen as individuals, on the whole, employers are extremely satisfied with the people with disabilities who have been hired through network activities, and the workers with disabilities compare favorably with other employees. Bob Gaspar, co-owner of Gaspar’s Linguica Products, has employed two workers with disabilities brought on through the network in 1987. Mr. Gaspar noted that one worker has never taken a day off, and once walked a significant distance to work in inclement weather when he missed a bus. He acknowledged that the workers needed some additional support, especially initially, but the workers are fully independent now, and “the people embrace these two. The work done by the two workers with disabilities adds value to the business. They fill a need. If they weren’t here, we would have to hire new people.”

Like any other applicant for a job or any other worker, some people do not work out well. Dorothy Cox, of Dorothy Cox Chocolates, noted that not all people can manage in a small business environment like hers in which things are different from day to day, but that does not mean that a different potential employee with disabilities will not work out in the job. The Supported Employment Network has created an awareness of the value of workers with disabilities, and during difficult economic times, the relationships with employees have led employers to reduce hours rather than doing blanket layoffs for persons with disabilities.

Employers Benefit from Supported Employment by:

- Hiring dependable employees who are committed to doing the job creating less turnover,
- Having easy access to an expanded labor pool and prescreened, qualified employees,
- Expanding the diversity of their workforce, and
- Assisting the employer in training the new employee.

Conclusion

The New Bedford Chamber of Commerce collaboration model underscores the *Ready and Able* findings:

- **Employers respond to a business case for employing people with disabilities**

Employers benefit from employing people with disabilities. Bob Gaspar stated, “More people would be willing to hire [workers with disabilities] if they could see that it would work. The thing that businesses like to hear is what other businesses do.” Rather than attempting to create new means for communication with employers, as is often done by supported employment organizations, marketing to employers using existing employer organizations can be far more effective. An active and supportive Chamber or other business-oriented organization makes the business case for hiring people with disabilities. These organizations provide access to employers more efficiently than any other means. Providing funding to a business-oriented organization to coordinate job outreach for persons with disabilities can be a cost-effective means for job development.

Employers’ appreciation for the value of employees with disabilities increases with experience. New Bedford area employers were skeptical of hiring people with disabilities when the Supported Employment Network was first developed. Successful experiences with employees with disabilities hired through the network have made them eager to include people with disabilities in their recruitment efforts to meet their workforce needs.

- **Innovative collaborations with and between workforce-supplying organizations enable employer efforts to recruit, hire, train, and support employees with disabilities**

New Bedford’s network of provider agencies led to a more tightly knit community and increased cooperation among supported employment providers. Competition between supported employment organizations can impede employment for people with disabilities. The Supported Employment Network has helped to reduce this. Creating a burden for employers is the single quickest way to impede employment for persons with disabilities. Making it simple and easy for employers is the fastest way to increase employment. The Supported Employment Network works because it is so easy for employers to participate. This innovative collaboration provides a strong unified voice in working with the New Bedford Chamber. Jim Mathes suggested that any project needs to start with shared affinities. An overlap between disability support people and the Chamber opened the initial doors. There was a shared set of values that made this project seem appealing to all parties. Because of this, Mathes was willing to do some initial fact finding that led him to support development of the partnership.

- **Collaborations ensure that workers are qualified and productive**

Professional staffing and troubleshooting in this project were seen as a tremendous benefit. Joanne Rego communicates with employers and disability support providers, and is fluent in both “languages.” Appropriate levels of on-site supports are a critical element for hiring persons with disabilities. Dorothy Cox highlighted the need for the support providers to be effective on site, as their actions are critical to the success or failure of a person with disabilities. Global and local knowledge of what employers want can be of great utility in improving employment for persons with disabilities.

- **Successful collaborations nurture and reward continuous leadership**

The New Bedford Chamber of Commerce showed impressive leadership in accepting the role of intermediary between local disability service agencies and its employer members. The result was the establishment of a pipeline of qualified employees with disabilities to meet local workforce needs. This is a model that can be replicated by Chambers of Commerce throughout the nation.

A New Approach to “Schoolwork”: The Pittsburgh Start on Success Program

Introduction

The Start on Success (SOS) program model was developed by the National Organization on Disability (NOD) in 1994 to prepare special education students from low-income urban families for competitive employment before they leave high school. SOS provides paid internships at nearby universities, hospitals, and corporations, introducing young people with disabilities to workplace realities before they leave high school. Students are matched to internships that take full advantage of their skills, interests, and longer-term career goals. Supervisors and co-workers at the business — non-teaching staff who are managers at the students’ internship sites — serve as mentors, providing a constant source of guidance and support to young people in need of dependable adults in their lives.⁷⁹

NOD has assisted in the development of SOS programs in New Orleans, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York City, Newark (New Jersey), central Connecticut, Los Angeles, and Pittsburgh. NOD “seeds” the model in these cities, but local government and education institutions adapt the model based on local preferences. The budgets to sustain the programs come from local sources. NOD sponsors an annual conference for representatives of SOS sites to come together to share successful practices.

In the national SOS program, more than 1,500 high school students with disabilities have had internships at universities, hospitals, and small businesses in the five cities, and 85% have gone on to full-time jobs or further education.⁸⁰ The founder and Director of SOS, Charles Dey, was honored with the Civic Ventures Purpose Prize, a “genius” grant program for exceptional achievement by social innovators over the age of 60.⁸¹

According to Cori DiBiase, the former national director of SOS for NOD, the Pittsburgh SOS program is one of the most comprehensive and successful replications of the SOS model, and has made the most of the public-private partnership at the heart of the project’s design. This profile discusses the innovative strategies that have shaped the SOS replication in Pittsburgh and its formal partnership, including the Pittsburgh Public School System, workforce and vocational rehabilitation agencies, and a network of local employers. The statistical outcomes of the Pittsburgh SOS program are impressive. SOS program graduates have a high school graduation rate of 97%. Further, 80% of program graduates are employed or enrolled in postsecondary education or training three months after graduation.⁸² These percentages are considerably higher than national averages.

A Comprehensive and Successful Replication

The Pittsburgh program was developed by the Pittsburgh Public School System in 1998 with assistance from NOD and the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board (TRWIB). According to Ellen Estomin, former Executive Director of Special Education for the Pittsburgh Public Schools, the school system has a longstanding commitment to employment and independence for special education graduates. The SOS model was viewed by the school district as a promising model to fulfill this commitment to students with learning disabilities.

Ashley McFall, SOS Transition Facilitator, said that a key component of the program is funding for the salaries for the student internships. The school district developed a collaborative relationship with TRWIB, which provides an allocation of Workforce Investment Act youth funding to cover the costs of the students' salaries each year.

The school district was also successful in establishing a collaborative relationship with the Pittsburgh district office of the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) regarding the SOS program. OVR assigned a designated vocational rehabilitation counselor to each of the nine high schools to work collaboratively with SOS staff on transition planning. Finally, the school district cultivated relationships with key local employers to provide mentorships, internships, and post-graduation employment opportunities.

High Stakes for High Skills: Operation of the Partnership

The Pittsburgh SOS program serves special education students with learning disabilities from nine high schools. It is a four-year program that starts when students enter the ninth grade. During the 2008-2009 school year, the Pittsburgh SOS program served 250 students in grades 9 through 12.⁸³ According to the SOS Web site, "Students in the Pittsburgh SOS program begin in the ninth grade with one elective course per day, preparing them for the career marketplace, including exploring their career goals, interests and capacities, building self-advocacy skills, and financial education."⁸⁴

During the 10th grade, students continue to participate in the career development curriculum

How are job sites chosen? According to Ashley McFall:

"In matching interns to job sites, we begin with student interests and aptitudes. Therefore, in selecting job site partners, we look for universities, hospitals, and corporations that offer exposure to a broad sampling of career pathways. Though not always feasible, we take pride in placing interns in settings non-traditional for young people with disabilities. There is no expectation that interns will become candidates for regular employment at their job sites."

but also receive an eight-week community mentorship experience at local employers to “provide them with exposure to a real work environment.”⁸⁵ Also during the 10th grade, students develop career portfolios and make presentations to local employer partners as part of an application process for paid internships in the 11th and 12th grades.

In the 12th grade, students continue to take transition courses but also participate in a paid internship at a local employer two hours per day. Students receive elective credits and are paid the local minimum wage for their work. Employer supervisors and co-workers mentor the SOS students. They supervise them in their assigned duties and guide and assist them as they adapt to the work environment. Itinerant teachers, in addition to teaching classes, provide supports to the employers. Ashley McFall emphasized that the itinerant teachers do not supervise interns at the worksite. She said an important element of the project is facilitating interns being fully included in the workplace.

During the 12th grade, SOS students meet with OVR, and almost all are enrolled with OVR. OVR counselors participate in planning for each enrolled student’s transition to employment or postsecondary education and provide a range of resources to support transition plans. Marci Katona, Assistant District Administrator with OVR, said the agency wants to open cases before graduation and sometimes as early as the spring of the student’s junior year if needed. She said that the partnership with the SOS program has resulted in students coming to OVR with greater job skills and ability to advocate for themselves.

Upon graduation, students begin employment, many at the same employers where they had internships, and some go on to postsecondary training. SOS staff track information on employment and postsecondary education outcomes for one year after each student exits the program.

Roles of the Partners

The Pittsburgh Public School System relies on support from a partnership, which is essential to the operation of the SOS program. Critical partners include TRWIB, CareerLink (Pennsylvania’s One-Stop system), OVR, and a network of local employers. The SOS program, in addition to providing core resources for students in the program, also is the coordinating partner.

Pittsburgh Public School System

The Pittsburgh Public School System employs the SOS Transition Facilitator who manages the program and seven itinerant teachers who are assigned to the program. The teachers participate in Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning, teach transition courses, collaborate with OVR counselors, provide travel training, monitor student mentorships and internships, and provide supports to employer partners. During their internships, the students are on the school system’s payroll, and are issued checks via funds provided by the Workforce Investment Board through the Pittsburgh Partnership. The school system also assists students in applying for post-graduation employment.

Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board

TRWIB provides an annual allocation of Workforce Investment Act youth funding to cover the cost of the wages for the SOS student internships. The funds are administered through the Pittsburgh Partnership, a division of the City of Pittsburgh's Department of Personnel and Civil Service Commission that acts as the administrative entity for Pittsburgh under the Workforce Investment Act. Each of the SOS students is enrolled in the Workforce Investment Act, and is registered with both Pennsylvania's One-Stop system, CareerLink, and the SOS program. The SOS program provides required reports and documentation to TRWIB and Pittsburgh Partnership staff.

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

OVR assigns a designated counselor to each of the high schools participating in the SOS program. Although these cases are generally opened during the student's senior year, the counselors collaborate with SOS itinerant teachers in IEP planning and keep abreast of the status of student internships before OVR cases are opened. Once a case is opened, OVR can provide funding for items such as clothing, transportation, and job coaching, and can also cover postsecondary education and training costs. OVR supports participants until 90 days of competitive employment is reached.

Employers

The SOS program has five primary employer partners: the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, Allegheny General Hospital, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and CIGNA Group Insurance. In addition to Workforce Investment Act funding, CIGNA also provides \$5,000 per year from the CIGNA Foundation to fund the summer employment program at CIGNA. These employers each have SOS internships within various departments. SOS also seeks other employers to respond to career interests of SOS students resulting in additional employer partnerships. In all, SOS had students placed in mentorships and internships at 53 employer sites during the 2008-2009 school year.

SOS signs a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with each employer site. The MOU states that employer staff will "...serve as role models, mentors and work supervisors. They will expose the interns to all aspects of the job and hold the interns to workplace standards for attendance, punctuality and communication. They will support the concept of lifelong learning. They will complete monthly progress reports and communicate with SOS staff, as needed to ensure success." Fulfilling these commitments requires a significant investment of employer staff time. As noted earlier, the employers that host mentorships and internships also hire many of the SOS interns upon graduation.

Not only does each partner contribute critical resources to the success of the program, each also receives benefits from the SOS program that sustain the partnership. The Pittsburgh Public Schools graduate special education students that are better prepared for an adulthood of education, employment, and independence. TRWIB and Pittsburgh Partnership have a

valuable and successful Workforce Investment Act youth program in SOS. OVR gets a large number of successful closures each year that on average require a smaller investment of resources. Finally, the employer partners have access to a pool of well-prepared, qualified employees that they have screened, trained, and developed relationships with before they are permanently hired. The SOS partnership, therefore, is based on common interests among the disability service and workforce entities. It also provides a supportive structure for employers to meet their workforce needs through training and recruiting transitioning students with disabilities.

Program Outcomes

While SOS has not compiled data on the percentages of its graduates who are hired by the employer partners, interviews with representatives of the employer partners indicate that they view the program as an opportunity to recruit qualified, reliable employees.

Lauren Catarinella, from the Department of Housing and Food Services at the University of Pittsburgh, said that the department hired the intern that was placed there. She said, “We knew what he can do. We built off the relationship and experience of the internship and have expanded his responsibilities since he has been employed full time.” She noted further that after a two-year internship, he had a “leg up” for full-time employment “since we know him.” She concluded that the ongoing communication and supports from SOS staff make it possible for the department to benefit from the program.

Tricia Crowley, Human Resource Manager for Sodexo Dining Services, confirmed that her company has hired seven of its interns. She views the employees that have been recruited from SOS as more reliable and loyal, resulting in lower turnover. She said, “It is an advantage to test out an employee to get experience and see if the employee will fit. This process leads to more successful hires.” She noted that her company values the support it receives from SOS staff and added, “We could not do this ourselves.” She concluded that supports to employers from community entities need to be ongoing and that this is an aspect of her company’s relationship with SOS that she particularly appreciates.

Ann Franks, from the University of Pittsburgh, Office of Institutional Advancement, said the university participates in SOS because it recognizes diversity as an important value. She said that supporting people with disabilities in the workplace is successful “when the employer has ongoing supports.” She concluded that SOS “makes it easier for us.”

When asked what benefits they receive from participating in the SOS program, Lori Ferguson, Director of Support Services for Allegheny General Hospital, said without hesitation “potential employees who have been trained.” She said that five SOS interns who worked there were hired in the past few years. In addition, Ferguson indicated that support from the SOS itinerant teacher was essential to the hospital’s participation in the project.

The Pittsburgh SOS program meets all five of the guideposts for success identified by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), in collaboration with the National Collaborative on Workforce Disability for Youth. The guideposts reflect what research has identified as key educational and career development interventions that can make a positive difference in the lives of all youth, including youth with disabilities. The five guideposts are as follows:

- School-based preparatory experiences,
- Career preparation and work-based experiences,
- Youth development and leadership,
- Connecting activities, and
- Family involvement and supports.

Dr. John Wilds, Director of the Office of Governmental and Community Relations at the University of Pittsburgh, who has been a partner in SOS since its inception, said that “SOS gives students the opportunity to demonstrate capability to employers. It makes the employer more comfortable and puts the student in a preferred position for hiring.” He said that an important reason for the university’s participation in SOS is to meet staffing needs. He said that his office has had success with students it has hired and some have gone on to postsecondary education at the university. He said that he is “very pleased with the program.”

Conclusion

The Pittsburgh SOS program is a successful example of a school system coordinating a partnership to enable employers to recruit, hire, and retain transitioning students with disabilities. The overall graduation and employment rates for SOS graduates well exceed national norms. Additionally, feedback from employer partners indicate that SOS is a valued resource for meeting their workforce needs.

The innovations of the Pittsburgh SOS program and the strength of its cooperative institutions have important implications for the *Ready and Able* findings:

- **Employers respond to a business case for employing people with disabilities**

Employers invest considerable staff resources into training and mentoring students with disabilities, which results in the recruitment of qualified, reliable employees. The employer partners in the Pittsburgh SOS expend an extraordinary amount of staff resources on

training and supervising mentees and interns. They are willing to do this because their participation in the program assists them in meeting their workforce needs. This shows the value employers place on recruiting skilled employees with disabilities.

- **Innovative collaborations with and between workforce-supplying organizations enable employer efforts to recruit, hire, train, and support employees with disabilities**

The Pittsburgh SOS program is a model for school districts to establish and coordinate partnerships to facilitate the employment of transitioning students with disabilities. The success of the program creates opportunities for employers to meet their workforce needs through collaborations with school districts. School system staff supports are essential to employer participation in the program and their recruitment of SOS students. Although employers see the value of participating in the SOS program to their respective bottom lines, they say their participation would not be possible without the ongoing, trusted support from SOS staff. This highlights the importance of a single point of contact that provides supports for employers' efforts to facilitate the employment of people with disabilities.

The Pittsburgh SOS partnership opened up new possibilities for the partner organizations to provide employment opportunities for transitioning students with disabilities. The Pittsburgh SOS program is a rich example of using resources available through the Workforce Investment Act and the generic workforce system to facilitate the employment of students with disabilities. Workforce entities can be valued partners in disability employment initiatives.

- **Collaborations ensure that workers are qualified and productive**

The program shows the value of mentorships and internships for employers to have greater experience with people with disabilities and allows people with disabilities to show their talent to employers. The mentorship and internship experiences facilitated by the Pittsburgh SOS program result in students being better prepared for employment. Additionally, employers value the opportunity to get to know the person and their skills prior to making a decision to hire them. These pre-graduation experiences are effective strategies for both employers and individuals with disabilities.

- **Successful collaborations nurture and reward continuous leadership**

The leadership of the Pittsburgh SOS program has done an extraordinary job of developing and maintaining successful relationships with an ever-expanding network of employers and vocational rehabilitation and workforce partners. These relationships have resulted in greater employment outcomes for graduating students with disabilities.

The Project SEARCH Model: Partnerships for Sustained Opportunity

Introduction

Project SEARCH began in 1995 as part of a broad diversity effort by Cincinnati Children's Hospital to build a reliable, stable workforce that represented the surrounding community. At that time, Cincinnati Children's Hospital was having difficulty filling entry-level positions, and turnover was an endemic problem. Erin Riehle, R.N., Director of the hospital's emergency department, looked to new strategies to solve this problem.

Ms. Riehle contacted staff from Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development, the largest technical school in the area, and one with a significant proportion of students (28%) with developmental disabilities. She also contacted the Hamilton County Board of Developmental Disabilities (BDD) for assistance. The response to Ms. Riehle from Susie Rutkowski at Great Oaks, and Jennifer Linnabary, at Hamilton County BDD, was very positive. They viewed the contact from Ms. Riehle as a great opportunity for the people they served.

Great Oaks and Hamilton County BDD assisted Ms. Riehle in hiring a young woman with Down syndrome as a stock clerk. The employee excelled, leading Cincinnati Children's Hospital, in partnership with Great Oaks, BDD and, subsequently, the Cincinnati School District and the Ohio Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, to create the Project SEARCH High School Transition Program to train and place students with disabilities or other challenges in positions at the hospital. The partnership helps to solve workforce issues at the hospital and at the same time provides opportunities for youth with disabilities. Ms. Riehle, in a *Washington Post* interview, noted, "A fair amount of hospital revenue comes from providing medical care to kids with disabilities. We had an awareness that we needed to provide role models in our workforce."⁸⁶ A program for adults with disabilities was developed subsequently.

There are currently five programs in Cincinnati, all coordinated through public schools. Most participants have an intellectual disability, with about 50% having dual diagnoses or another disabling condition such as autism. On average, each business in the program hires 25% of the interns it hosts each year. Program staff assist the other participants to find jobs in the community using their skills in related businesses. In total, the employment rate for Project SEARCH graduates has been approximately 80%. In 2009, Cincinnati Children's Hospital employed 60 individuals with disabilities hired through Project SEARCH.⁸⁷ The average work week for these employees is 32 hours at an average salary of \$10.83 per hour. Turnover for these employees is lower than for employees without disabilities and the program director reported that many participants have worked at the hospital for 12 or 13 years.

The success of Project SEARCH in facilitating the employment of people with disabilities has generated interest across the United States and the world. With its positive track record, Project SEARCH also operates as a business, providing technical assistance to sites and states across the nation seeking to replicate this model of workforce development.

How Project SEARCH Works: An Immersion Approach

Project SEARCH at Cincinnati Children's Hospital has two components: the High School Transition Program and the Adult Employment Program.

The *High School Transition Program* includes a one-year skills training program for transition-age youth with disabilities that continues to support those participants who are hired by the hospital for as long as they remain employed. It is targeted for students whose main goal is competitive employment. It is a challenging program because it forces families and young adults to make a major transition during the year.

Unlike traditional high school special education experiences, Project SEARCH immerses students in the host business for an entire school year. The curriculum occurs on site with five to six hours per day spent on individualized skills training in real work sites. Students complete a "rotation" through various jobs to discover their interests and aptitudes. Each student averages 910 hours on skills training per year. Each day also includes one hour that focuses on employability skills such as problem solving, communication, use of technology, budgeting, nutrition, and hygiene, all related to the specific business environments. The internships focus on acquiring clinical and technical "core skills" that are competitive and transferable to other similar work environments.

Individualized job development and placement begin after the rotations are completed. Students are given support through job coaching and worksite accommodations with the ultimate goal of independence. Program staff connect students to appropriate community services in order to ensure a successful transition to work as well as retention and career advancement. This program is funded by participating school districts. The Cincinnati School District has been a long-term participant in Project SEARCH. Greg Lynch of Project SEARCH noted that being located in a large city with a large school district assisted the initiative's initial development.

Project personnel focus on each student's interests and job preferences. When potential participants come for an orientation, they are asked what kind of work they want to do. In the first few weeks in the program, participants are exposed to a variety of internships and program staff encourage the students to consider options. Project SEARCH staff help young people develop an "individual career plan," taking into account the team's assessment, family wishes, and available jobs.

The program maintains a staff-to-participant ratio of 1 to 3, with 1 teacher-coordinator hired by the school district and 3 job coaches for 12 students. The job coaches are paid through a combination of vocational rehabilitation, community agency, and school district funds. The teacher provides instruction and some job coaching, identifies internships, and acts in a case management role. For those employees with mental health disabilities, when needed, staff consult with or refer participants to a program-sponsored psychiatric nurse who has specific training in dual diagnosis. They may take advantage of supports provided by the hospital's Employee Assistance Program, a benefit available to any employee. Students may be eligible for other specialized training and therapy depending on their disability.

Project SEARCH staff emphasize family involvement through open houses, an annual picnic, and monthly meetings with family members. The project requires parents to sign a contract outlining their involvement. Families are involved in selecting internships and updating the career plan as the year progresses and the student moves toward employment. Program staff have found that families who attend meetings have a much better understanding of the goals and are more likely to support their family member to be successful in the job search process. Project SEARCH continues to support family involvement through a curriculum that encourages involvement during the transition, training, and job search process. This program engages families and caregivers in monthly meetings to learn skills to assist their family member with creating linkages and finding jobs. Program staff meet with families to discuss Social Security benefits and planning.

Through the *Adult Employment Program* at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, graduating students receive a comprehensive approach to employment, job retention, and career advancement for individuals with disabilities. Erin Riehle noted that in other settings, multiple disability provider organizations might be operating within a single place of employment, causing confusion and burden to the employer. Project SEARCH's Adult Employment Program functions as a single point of entry, which greatly simplifies the functioning. The Adult Employment Program coordinates job development and agency referrals with human resource needs. Project SEARCH assists the hospital and potential employees by matching qualified employees with open positions in a variety of settings. On-the-job support, such as job coaching, adaptations and accommodations, final task definitions, and travel training, are provided by the Adult Employment Program rather than by external providers. Funding for this service is provided by the Ohio Vocational Rehabilitation agency. It is important to note that Cincinnati Children's Hospital has access to a tremendous amount of disability expertise through the partnership.

Greg Lynch described the arrangement between Project SEARCH and Cincinnati Children's Hospital to be a standard educational agreement. The hospital provides space and a business liaison that gives 10% to 15% of time in job and internship location. Work opportunities at the hospital go beyond traditional jobs for persons with disabilities. "All job titles as appropriate are available," stated Mr. Lynch. Training is adapted for the specific student or employee, through Great Oaks and the school district.

High Involvement, High Expectations: How Project SEARCH is a Model Nationwide

Based on its success, the Project SEARCH model has been replicated in over 140 other sites in the United States and in Europe. Information about Project SEARCH is disseminated via the Internet and public presentations to a wide variety of audiences. The replication model requires participants to receive an hour of employability skills curriculum each morning and then spend the rest of the day (five hours), Monday through Friday, working in a hospital department or in a business. Participants get three 10-week rotations with the goal of preparing participants for competitive employment. The first two internships are at the host business and often the third internship is in the community near where the student lives.

Each Project SEARCH site serves 12 young adults with collaboration among many partners, including education, vocational rehabilitation, service providers, employers, and families. Students are in their last year of high school eligibility, meaning they are 18 to 21 years old. If there are not enough young adult students interested in the program, the openings are offered to young adults who have previously graduated from high school but remain unemployed. The program works with a variety of employers, including banks, hospitals, insurance companies, a zoo, universities, and government. Typically, program staff seek employers that are willing to open their business to training. They prefer businesses on a public transportation line and with a cafeteria, based on a belief that people with significant disabilities want to gain independence.

Once a business hires a Project SEARCH graduate, it can take advantage of long-term services offered by developmental disabilities agencies or by referring them to typical employee assistance programs, if the business has one. The program director reported that staff also work with the department managers to help them “understand what is acceptable and what is not with a person with a disability, so they are not making them jump through hoops that are too high, or not making the hoops so low.” They also work with human resources departments as necessary to revise policies.

In each Project SEARCH program, regardless of industry sector, internships are developed that are complex but systematic. Core skills are identified and taught in a systematic manner. Departments have the support of job coaches and the instructor. When hired, individuals with disabilities make the prevailing wage for that position.

Project SEARCH is based on partnerships that are led by the business. As the program director commented, “It is the business saying, ‘I want a hand in selecting the students. I am going to get involved with them...I want to be involved daily.’” Project SEARCH participants must have finished the education credits necessary for graduation and must be 18 to 21 years old. They must not have accepted their diploma and must still be enrolled in their local school district in order to be considered eligible for the educational funding. The program seeks participants who are ready for community employment, specifically young people who “can have good attendance and punctuality” and have good “work behaviors.” For example,

as a program leader noted, “You can’t wear jeans and a...sweatshirt. You have to dress like the work people. You have to act like them. You have to have attendance like they do.” Participants must be able to take basic direction and, if necessary, modify their performance and behaviors, have a method of communicating, and be independent in toileting or feeding, although assistance can be provided by a personal assistant. Parents are required to sign a contract saying that they will support the participant.

Project SEARCH offers a licensing agreement so that others can replicate the model and use its materials, curriculum, application packet, marketing tools, DVD, and grant application templates at no cost. Organizations that want to create a Project SEARCH program must agree to the model components, including collaborating with local partners, creating an inclusive work environment, and paying a prevailing wage. They also have to agree that they will not use Project SEARCH materials to create their own consulting business. If local communities are interested in establishing a program, they invite one of the program leaders to provide training and share information about the model. They assist with the planning process, which includes an implementation plan, curriculum, sample internships, and Memoranda of Understanding. Program start-up typically takes 6 to 10 months.

Replicating the Model: Project SEARCH at Riverview Medical Center in Red Bank, New Jersey

Riverview Medical Center (RMC), a health care facility in Red Bank, New Jersey, and member of the Meridian Health Family, hosts one of the Project SEARCH replication sites. Initiated in 2008, the program is a partnership between RMC and Educational Collaborations, Inc./ LifeWork, a disability support provider. As of 2009, all persons with disabilities participating in the project are high school students. The partnership started when Jessica Short from LifeWork saw Erin Riehle speak at a conference in New Jersey. She recalls thinking, “This was a perfect program for high school students we were currently working with and we wanted to bring it to our area.” Ms. Short contacted Ms. Riehle about starting a replication site in New Jersey, got some advice on the best way to initiate this, and approached the Meridian Health human resources department to propose the idea of the partnership.

Beth Mulroy, R.N., a human resources generalist with RMC, noted, “It was intriguing enough for us from an organizational perspective to come in and pitch it to the HR steering committee, which is comprised of members of our Board of Trustees. They pitched the whole Project SEARCH idea and background and we got very excited about it so we said we’re on.” Project SEARCH fits well within the Meridian Health Family’s vision of progressive health care and future orientation. The fact that there was support from the top level and from the presidents of each of the hospitals was crucial in the establishment of the Project SEARCH efforts at RMC.

A Model that Works: How to Build a Project SEARCH Program

- “Braided funding” creates a program that taps into existing funding for staffing and services.
- The host business contributes the classroom or a meeting space, the internship sites, and a business liaison. The business also provides desks or cubicles for teachers and staff. The business liaison (usually a department manager or human resource associate) assists the teacher to identify internships and helps navigate the business and its culture.
- The education system provides the teacher and employability skills curriculum, including supplies and equipment such as computers or assistive technology.
- Job coaches are provided by combined funding from vocational rehabilitation, community agencies, and the school. Coaching staff provide on-site systematic training at the internship site. This provides support to both the student intern and the co-workers.
- Developmental disabilities services or mental health funding pays for follow-along services for those graduates who are hired and eligible.

Establishment of the Project SEARCH replication was helped greatly by visits from Erin Riehle and Susie Rutkowski who shared information on Project SEARCH and the experiences from Cincinnati Children’s Hospital. Selection of potential jobs at RMC for the students was an early area of focus for the project and involved significant effort from RMC. Beth Mulroy noted, “It starts with seeing what has been successful at Cincinnati Children’s. We look to where other hospitals have had success and our operations. We use common sense — service, clerical, professional, and clinical. We look at where they could do the work as well as the management of those areas.”

Details of the partnership were established early in the development and mirrored the efforts pioneered at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital. Among the most difficult challenges were issues such as space and purchase of materials. Many other details were resolved through use of the templates provided by Project SEARCH. All parties agreed that the roles were clear from the start. RMC and LifeWork operate through a completely delineated agreement with the expectations and time commitment, but not a contract. Ms. Mulroy observed, “It was all well laid out thanks to Project SEARCH and their success elsewhere. They have a business plan that is well defined and we kind of bought it.” Along with the goal of establishing a pipeline of workers, RMC has an additional expectation to give work opportunities to students with disabilities. RMC sees disability as part of health care and wants to mirror the community.

In the 2008-2009 school year, students from seven different districts participated, and students from each followed a common school calendar. In May, students interview with Project SEARCH and RMC staff. Parents of the students participate in the interview activities as well. During July, the students are trained in use of public transportation and participate in team-building activities. Orientation to the hospital occurs in September, including hospital tours, and occurs with other general staff who are being oriented at that time. There is a significant effort to immerse the students in the culture of RMC. Following completion of the orientation, the students begin 10-week work activity rotations. The work activities are identified by RMC. The human resources department meets with the hospital managers and “hammers out” the jobs and expectations. Each manager selects a point person in the department to mentor the student. There is a clear expectation that the department makes the student a part of the team.

The day for each student begins with a one-hour morning meeting in which instruction is provided. Much of the instruction focuses on social and work behavior. Project SEARCH staff are careful to use work language, and not educational language (e.g., conference room instead of classroom). Of the educational content for the students, approximately half was created locally, and the other half came directly from Project SEARCH in Cincinnati. A handbook for hospital managers explains relevant details of the project, including roles and responsibilities. On-site activities are determined by the specific work that the students are doing. Students are evaluated every three weeks, and there is a team meeting for students, including their families, every six weeks. Students are instructed in the use of sick time and vacation protocols, like any other hospital employee. At the completion of the school year, if students have acquired the necessary skills, they can be hired by RMC. Funding for LifeWork is provided by fees paid by the school on a per-student basis. LifeWork purchased support from the Project SEARCH national office.

All parties involved with Project SEARCH at RMC see tremendous success, and the initiative has spread within RMC. The efforts at RMC started in 7 departments, and based on the accomplishments of the project, it had expanded to 13 departments by the end of the 2009 school year. Meridian Health Family operates two other hospitals, and planned to expand Project SEARCH to another hospital in the system in 2010. The third hospital is under expansion, and will be considered as a host site for Project SEARCH when it is completed. As another measure of success, three of the nine students for the first year have been hired. LifeWork continues to provide service and a job coach, for one student in particular. Jessica Short noted, “The partnership between Meridian and LifeWork has been an instrumental part of bringing the Project SEARCH model into reality in New Jersey. I really see it as the next developmental step for the students we are working with, to be fully immersed in a genuine work experience.” It has not been perfect for all students. One student did not want to work, and was “fired.” However, Beth Mulroy noted that the students add value to the hospital that cannot be measured. “The interns add something to the culture of the organization that is felt throughout,” she said. “I can’t put my finger on what it is, but it is good for the organization.”

Replicating the Model: Project SEARCH at the U.S. Department of Labor in Washington, D.C.

Project SEARCH DC is a collaborative project between the U.S. Department of Labor and its Office of Disability Employment Policy, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), the District of Columbia Department on Disability Services - Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and Developmental Disabilities Administration, the Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy Institute of Catholic Charities, and Project SEARCH in Cincinnati.

The partners started working together in December 2008 to lay the groundwork for the 2009-2010 school year. This program prepares participating students in their last year of high school for competitive employment in the community. Up to 12 students spend their entire school day at the U.S. Department of Labor with a DCPS teacher and several employment staff, furnished by RSA and the Kennedy Institute. At the start and end of each day, the students work on employability skills, following an employability skills curriculum, in a classroom provided by the U.S. Department of Labor. The rest of the day is spent in work experiences for which they applied, were interviewed, and were selected. These work experiences teach competitive, marketable job skills. Each student participates in three 10- to 11-week internships during the program year. Participating students receive daily support from the instructor, job coaches, and mentors within the U.S. Department of Labor. Each student participates in a variety of skills development experiences to obtain skills leading to employment in the community or within the federal government.

This is the first project of its kind in the federal government and the U.S. Department of Labor views it as a model that it hopes to replicate throughout the federal government system. The partners are very excited about bringing this proven model to the District of Columbia.

Conclusion

The success of the Project SEARCH strategy, plus the acclaim it has received, has important implications for strategies to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities. These implications are presented in the context of the *Ready and Able* findings as follows:

- **Employers respond to a business case for employing people with disabilities**

Project SEARCH was created in response to a business need at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. The hospital was having problems with attracting sufficient candidates and staff turnover. Due to the success of the program in meeting employment needs at the hospital, the Project SEARCH model has been replicated at over 140 sites worldwide. This expansion continues because Project SEARCH is meeting employers' needs for qualified, reliable employees.

- **Innovative collaborations with and between workforce-supplying organizations enable employer efforts to recruit, hire, train, and support employees with disabilities**

The Project SEARCH model involves partnerships between employers and organizations providing supports for people with disabilities, including school systems, and agencies providing vocational rehabilitation, developmental disabilities, and mental health services. The model includes strategies for coordinating public funding from multiple sources for training and supports configured to meet the needs of the employer. Additionally, Project SEARCH at Cincinnati Children's Hospital operates its own support program for its employees with public funding.

- **Collaborations ensure that workers are qualified and productive**

Project SEARCH utilizes an innovative curriculum to prepare young adults with significant disabilities for non-traditional jobs, including youth who are dually eligible for services. The curriculum addresses a range of skills related to employment preparedness and independent living, including problem solving, communication, use of technology, budgeting, nutrition, and hygiene. Participants have opportunities to experience different internships and staff work with them to develop an "individual career plan." Staff break down jobs into their essential duties and then spend a year teaching those core technical and employability skills. Internships are arranged in real employment environments.

Project SEARCH confirms that the coordinated use of innovative workforce supports makes it possible for persons with significant disabilities to work in a wide variety of jobs. Project SEARCH participants have shown the ability to complete complicated work tasks with accuracy and speed.

Finally, Project SEARCH demonstrates a successful strategy to provide mental health supports in the workplace, as a component of an effective employee assistance plan. This has broad implications for replication. Many employers offer employee assistance plans, but may not think of such a plan as being applicable to workers with disabilities. Project SEARCH's experience indicates that employing a more generic, universal resource, such as employee assistance plans, is less burdensome to organizations as they pursue new collaborations.

- **Successful collaborations nurture and reward continuous leadership**

Project SEARCH was developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital as a result of the leadership of Erin Riehle. She established partnerships with impressive leaders in the disability community such as Susie Rutkowski at Great Oaks and Jennifer Linnabary at Hamilton County BDD. Their collaborative efforts led to the development of a model that now meets the needs of employers across the world through the employment of people with disabilities.