

2011

Policy Brief on Employment and Transition-Age Adults and Their Families

**“We need
everybody in the
workforce for
businesses to
thrive and
communities to
prosper.”**



POLICY BRIEF ON EMPLOYMENT AND TRANSITION-AGE ADULTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The purpose of the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) is to facilitate dialogue and develop leadership on disability and employment policy that will result in increased competitive employment of Minnesotans with disabilities. Partnership is crucial to the initiative's success. MEPI is enlisting strategic partners from disability advocacy groups, counties, state disability councils, human resources organizations, employment services providers and other service providers, Centers for Independent Living, the University of Minnesota, businesses and business organizations and state agencies.

Together, MEPI and its partners have undertaken wide-ranging activities to bring together stakeholders to shape and advance public policy. They have convened "listening sessions" to be used as the basis for policy briefs identifying recommendations that will improve competitive employment outcomes for Minnesotans with disabilities. The recommendations are focused around the core question: **"What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?"**

Executive Summary

Two listening sessions on transition from school to work were facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative. They were hosted by Community Transition Interagency Committees (CTICs) with one in the Twin Cities and one in Greater Minnesota. MEPI also participated in the Minnesota Employment First Coalition's third summit which focused on families, many of whom discussed transition services. Transition was also discussed by listening session participants in the eight disability groups participating in other MEPI listening sessions. The following recommendations were identified from the themes generated by the listening session participants. Some recommendations were specific to transition and others were also applicable to adults with disabilities. The recommendations specific to transition are:

- **Ensure families have expectations of competitive employment for their children with disabilities.**
- **Utilize social connections, or "social capital", during job development to achieve better employment outcomes and to empower families during transition.**

- **Ensure students with disabilities have real jobs for real pay while they are still attending school.**
- **Ensure young adults with disabilities graduate directly and seamlessly into competitive jobs or postsecondary education.**
- **Redesign transition services for young adults aged 18-21 to produce better employment and postsecondary education outcomes through interagency collaboration.**

Recommendations that would also apply in general to Minnesotans with disabilities are:

- **Utilize alternative processes to achieve employment outcomes.**
- **Ensure ongoing supports are available to individuals who need them to obtain and retain employment.**
- **Ensure lifelong learning opportunities are available to individuals for ongoing career development and advancement.**
- **Engage business leaders in demand-side training and career development strategies to ensure that unique learners with disabilities are preparing for careers in emerging economies where there will be a high demand for their skills in good paying jobs.**

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative has completed listening sessions with eight disability groups in addition to sessions specific to transition and families. The information gathered through the listening sessions is being analyzed to develop a summary of commonalities between the groups. Representatives from the various listening session groups will then be reconvened to strategize on addressing the policy implications for improving employment outcomes. From these strategies, a more specific set of recommendations for action will be developed to move toward doubling the employment rate of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015.

Background on Transition

The transition from school to adult living is increasingly recognized as a major shift in the lives of young people and their families with a variety of opportunities and challenges. Halpern defines transition as:

...a change in status from behaving primarily as a student to assuming emergent adult roles in the community. These roles include employment, participating in post-secondary

education, maintaining a home, becoming appropriately involved in the community, and experiencing satisfactory personal and social relationships.¹

Minnesota has been a recognized leader in providing educational services for students with disabilities. This progressive spirit also put Minnesota in the forefront of providing transition services to students leaving the school system. Minnesota's laws on transition services preceded federal mandates with requirements that school districts include secondary transition planning in students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) during grade nine.

The 1980s were the "transition years" in Minnesota. Minnesota received a five-year systems change grant to expand supported employment services with a strong focus on transition. As a result, multiple stakeholders, including parents, recommended legislation to address this important need. The legislature established the Minnesota Interagency Office on Transition Services in the Department of Education to better address transition needs statewide. The State Transition Interagency Committee (STIC) was formed to encourage collaboration at the state and local level. Legislation enacted in 1987 also specifically defined the roles of Community Transition Interagency Committees (CTICs) in promoting collaborative transition planning at the local level. Since the 1980s, Minnesota has continued to secure major federal systems change grants and to use discretionary funding to promote interagency collaboration and more successful transition outcomes at the state and local level. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) now requires states to report on both transition compliance and postsecondary outcomes.

Despite numerous challenges that schools, families, and adult service agencies face in providing effective services to secondary students with disabilities, Minnesota continues to find ways to promote interagency collaboration. A few of those initiatives include:

- A two-year interagency agreement between the Minnesota Department of Education (Special Education Policy) and Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) within the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development to provide meeting/working space to VRS counselors to serve students within the schools.
- Assigning VRS counselors to every high school in Minnesota.
- Increasing the number of students aged 16-21 with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) served by VRS from 11% in 2005 to 20% in 2010.
- In 2009-2010, VRS "Innovation in Transition" grants exploring creative approaches to job placement and career development for youth with significant disabilities.

¹ Cobb, B. & Alwell, M. (2007, December). Transition Planning/Coordinating Interventions for Youth with Disabilities: A Systematic Review. *National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center*, pp. 1-16.

- Developing new communication materials and presentations to increase employment outcomes through a collaborative initiative between VRS, Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS).
- Expansion of the 2003 Dakota County Youth Zone model within Minnesota WorkForce Centers.²
- Beginning in 2007, Minnesota Camps to Careers providing career planning support.³
- Expansion of the 2003 “Connecting to Success Mentoring through Technology” initiative through E-connect, a modified mentoring program supported by the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Community Integration that utilizes electronic communication between students and adults employed in the technology field.⁴
- Expansion of the 2006 Disability Mentoring Day model which develops collaboration at the local level through the promotion of career exploration and work experience opportunities.⁵
- Introduction, in 2010, of Project SEARCH, an interagency collaborative model to improve competitive employment outcomes for students with significant disabilities. The model requires that education, employers, vocational rehabilitation services and community employment providers work together.
- Development in 2008 of the *Minnesota Secondary Transition Compliance Toolkit* by MDE to assist special educators and interagency partners in secondary transition planning.
- Establishment in 1998 of the Minnesota State Interagency Committee (MnSIC) to promote coordinated planning for youth with disabilities, age birth to 21, and their families.⁶
- MDE “Building Capacity to Create Work Experiences and Competitive Employment Opportunities for High School Students with Disabilities” grants targeting improved employment outcomes through interagency planning and work experience opportunities.

² WorkForce Centers are Minnesota’s OneStops, a Department of Labor Initiative for Jobseekers and Businesses.

³ For more information on Minnesota Camps to Careers, visit www.positivelyminnesota.com/All_Programs_Services/Pathways_to_Employment/For_Service_Providers_Community_Partners/Camps_to_Careers.aspx.

⁴ For more information on E-connect, visit www.positivelyminnesota.com/All_Programs_Services/Pathways_to_Employment/For_Service_Providers_Community_Partners/E-Connect.aspx.

⁵ For more information on Disability Mentoring Day, visit www.positivelyminnesota.com/All_Programs_Services/Pathways_to_Employment/For_Service_Providers_Community_Partners/Disability_Mentoring_Day.aspx.

⁶ To learn more about MnSIC, visit www.education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning_Support/Special_Education/Interagency_Services/MN_State_Interagency_Coord_MnSIC/index.html.

- Project C3: Connecting Youth to Communities and Careers, a collaborative partnership among several Minnesota state agencies and PACER Center using resource mapping, training, and advocacy enabling communities to connect to services for transition, employment, and accessing postsecondary education.⁷
- Minnesota’s Shared Vision for Youth, part of a national effort to coordinate local, state and federal programs to better serve disadvantaged youth by strengthening collaboration, coordination, and communication among state agencies and youth-serving organizations.⁸
- Anoka County’s Transition and Customized Employment (TCE) Project, a five-year national demonstration project from 2003-2008, documenting the effectiveness of customized employment practices to increase and widen the range of integrated job outcomes in support of young adults in transition from school to careers.⁹
- The emergence of the Minnesota Employment First movement and production of the Minnesota Employment First Summit Report in 2007, stressing the importance of increasing expectations and improving transition policies and practices so competitive employment in the workforce is the preferred outcome for all youth leaving secondary education in Minnesota regardless of type or level of disability.¹⁰

Despite the many years of focus on transition and the extended time in school for students aged 18 to 21, interagency collaboration at the local level continues to be inconsistent across the state, resulting in too few students graduating into jobs or postsecondary education. Schools tend to provide “work experiences” rather than jobs, and agencies such as VRS and the counties view the transition years as primarily the responsibility of the schools and are reluctant to commit resources until near the end of school services or upon graduation. The “Minnesota Post-School Follow-Up Survey” data collection system suggests that outcomes are improving in the percentage of youth enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school, but significant work remains to be done. For 2008-9 approximately two-thirds of those surveyed were either employed or enrolled in postsecondary education; one-third were not.¹¹

National educational policy through “No Child Left Behind” has also had a negative impact on students with disabilities. Listening session participants identified that the heavy emphasis on

⁷ To learn more about Project C3, visit the website at www.c3online.org.

⁸ Minnesota's Shared Vision for Youth is outlined in the Shared Vision Blueprint and Resource Directory.

⁹ Rogers, C, Lavin, D, Tran, T, Gantenbein, T, & Sharpe, M. (2008). Customized employment: Changing what it means to be qualified in the workforce for transition-aged youth and young adults. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 28, 191-207.

¹⁰ A Consensus Report of the Minnesota Employment First Summit. (2007). *Pathways to Employment*. Retrieved from: <http://www.mnapse.org/Employment-First-Report-Summit-2.pdf>.

¹¹ 2008-2009 Minnesota Annual Report on Special Education Performance. (2010). *Minnesota Department of Education*. Retrieved from: <http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/groups/SpecialEd/documents/Report/019239.pdf>.

academic achievement for all students has resulted in fewer resources for vocational education. Listening session participants reported that vocational programs had fallen victim to budget cuts as school districts face budget deficits and a heavy emphasis on meeting the primarily academic objectives of “No Child Left Behind.” Vocational education, including career development, is critical to post-school employment outcomes. Secondary education places an emphasis on preparation for 4-year degrees, to the exclusion of postsecondary options and opportunities. A recent report from the Harvard Graduate School of Education emphasizes the need for multiple paths for career development as essential to school reform for all students.¹²

Nationally, considerable research has focused on variables that impact transition and employment outcomes. The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center has identified the following three evidence-based predictors of post-school employment:¹³

- Inclusion in general education
- Paid employment/work experience
- Work study

Luecking and Gramlich stress the importance of work-based learning opportunities, citing the strong relationship between paid work experience during high school and post-school job success. They identify a range of benefits including:

- Identifying career interests, skills and abilities
- Exploring career goals
- Identifying support needs for employment
- Developing employability skills and good work habits
- Gaining an understanding of employer expectations
- Developing greater understanding of the link between education and work
- Gaining work experience
- Developing an understanding of the connection between learning and earning¹⁴

¹² Harvard Graduate School of Education. (February 2011). *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*. The report can be accessed at: http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news_events/features/2011/Pathways_to_Prosperty_Feb2011.pdf

¹³ Test, D. W. Fowler, C., Kohler, P., & Korterling, L. (2010, April). Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors in Secondary Transition: What We Know and What We Still Need to Know. *National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC)*, pp. 1-8.

¹⁴ Luecking, R. & Gramlich, M. (2003). Quality Work-Based Learning and Postschool Employment Success. *Examining Current Challenges in Secondary Education and Transition*, 2(2), Retrieved from: www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=1192

Cobb and Alwell also cite research that emphasizes the importance of work experience in real jobs with an emphasis on socialization with co-workers and access to role models and mentors.¹⁵

Cameto *et. al.* report that more youth with disabilities are working at part-time paid jobs while attending school than in the past.¹⁶ According to parent reports, almost 60% of youth with disabilities were employed during a one-year period, with the majority having non-school related jobs. Some disability groups have employment rates similar to students without disabilities; however, students with more significant disabilities were more likely to hold work-study positions.

Employment First Coalition Family Summit

Families have a significant impact on transition and employment outcomes. On May 1, 2010, the Minnesota Employment First Coalition held its third summit which focused on families.¹⁷ Although transition was not the sole target at the summit, it emerged as one of the leading topics discussed by participants. The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative participated in the summit and identified the following themes among participants:

- Families start with the expectation that their child will work.
- Over time, that expectation of work can weaken through interactions with professionals.
- The service delivery system does not empower families.
- Families believe that they need considerable information and training to learn to work with or challenge educational and adult service systems that do not focus on competitive employment outcomes.

Families reported that they have the same expectation that their child with a disability will work as they do for their children without disabilities. Work is a value they hold for all their children, and they see work as part of being an adult contributing to the community. However, as they interact with professionals within the schools and the adult service delivery system, families begin to question whether competitive employment is possible for their child, as professionals set the parameters of what is or is not possible based upon the current service delivery system.

As families described their experiences in trying to secure employment services for their children, it was clear that the service delivery system itself was perceived as a major barrier. Although education and adult services have identified the importance of empowering youth and

¹⁵ Cobb, B. & Alwell, M. (2007, December). Transition Planning/Coordinating Interventions for Youth with Disabilities: A Systematic Review.

¹⁶ Cameto, R., Marder, C., Wagner, M., & Cardoso, D. (2003). Youth Employment. *Reports from the National Longitudinal Transition Study, 2(2)*, Retrieved from: www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=1310

¹⁷ The summit report is available at <http://www.mnapse.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/report-3-proof.pdf>.

families in transition planning, the focus has been on training parents and youth to better understand the system rather than making the system more responsive to youth and families. Furney and Salembier¹⁸ in their review of literature on student and family participation in transition planning reached similar conclusions. They identified the intent of transition services to work with youth and families as decision makers, but concluded that numerous factors are built into the service delivery system that discourage active participation by individuals and families.

Service delivery systems are not designed to be user-friendly. They are limited in what they provide and who they serve. They tend to be technical, legalistic and complicated. They are also fragmented. Professionals are apt to forget that just because they understand their own system that does not mean it makes sense to individuals using that system, such as individuals and families, or that it is responsive to their needs. Professionals need to communicate to families in terms that focus less on the system and its jargon and more on the needs of students and families in the real world.

Professionals also need to keep in mind that transition is particularly difficult for families because they lose a long-term connection to the schools. Schools operate like a “one-stop shop” for families providing valuable information on both school and non-school resources. The adult service delivery system is comprised of multiple systems which are not well coordinated or uniformly managed. Families may need to connect with vocational rehabilitation, county services, employment services providers, WorkForce Centers, Social Security, advocacy organizations and other groups. Some families find that their children have hit the “transition cliff” and have “aged out” of services available to children and do not meet the eligibility requirements for the services available to adults, such as in the mental health system.

Families at the employment summit seemed to reach the conclusion that the only way to work with - or fight - the system is to learn more about how it works. Families clearly need some understanding of the service delivery system, but it is unlikely that most families can acquire the depth of understanding needed to secure competitive employment for their children, nor does that seem to be a reasonable expectation for several reasons.

First, the adult service delivery system is so complex and multi-faceted that even professionals usually do not understand more than their own part of it.¹⁹ Learning all the systems that impact employment is a huge undertaking for families and although some families have invested considerable time in this type of learning, many others give up in frustration.

¹⁸ Furney, K. S., & Salembier, G. Rhetoric and Reality: A Review of the Literature on Parent and Student Participation in the IEP and Transition Planning Process. *University of Vermont*, pp. 111-125.

¹⁹ Cross training of professionals to broaden their understanding of the different service delivery systems would be beneficial.

Another reason to question whether learning to work the system is the best approach for families is the poor results these systems achieve in employment outcomes. The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) reported in January 2011 that the employment rate for individuals with disabilities is about 20.1% compared to 69.5% for individuals without disabilities. If the current system achieves an employment rate for individuals with disabilities that is less than one-third that of individuals without disabilities, why would families want to learn to work with a system which produces such poor results?

Some of the reasons for those poor results are inherent in policies and practices such as the prevailing job development methods. The traditional job development process used by schools and employment providers for individuals with disabilities involves:

- Identifying advertised job openings
- Applying for those jobs online, in person or by sending in a resume
- Waiting for an interview
- Waiting for a job offer

In this traditional job development process, individuals with disabilities are competing for jobs within a large pool of jobseekers, through a process used by employers to “screen out” applicants. Individuals with disabilities are often among those who are screened out. In practice, this process does not work very well, even for individuals without disabilities.

The reality is that most people do not find jobs this way; they find them through personal connections. Families have a number of social connections, a form of “social capital” they use to find jobs for themselves and for their children without disabilities. Families have social connections through relatives, friends and acquaintances, co-workers, neighbors, etc. The natural role for families in finding jobs for their children is by working their social network. If families use their vast social networks to find jobs for their children with disabilities, they will be empowered through taking on a natural role for families in the job development process.

The Employment First Coalition Family Summit was extremely valuable in better understanding the experience of families in employment outcomes and contributed to several of the recommendations on doubling employment below.

Background on Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative Listening Sessions

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative has conducted listening sessions in the following areas:

Brain Injury
DeafBlindness
Blindness
Developmental Disabilities
Transition

Mental Health
Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Autism
Physical Disabilities
Families

Listening sessions are convened by a host organization, which selects participants representing a variety of perspectives. The listening sessions are facilitated by MEPI using three questions as the framework for the sessions. The questions are designed to build upon one another, creating momentum toward strategies for the final question on doubling employment.

The first question - **“Why is Work Important?”** - helps a group to focus specifically on employment. It also reminds the group of the benefits work provides to individuals with disabilities and creates a positive orientation for the subsequent questions.

The second set of questions - **“What’s Working? What are Minnesota’s Strengths Related to Employment?”** - builds on the first question, reminding participants of the many services, initiatives, and groups that are already in place or in the planning stages to improve employment outcomes. It identifies strengths on which to build and also opportunities to produce better collaboration between groups and initiatives. It also creates a shared frame of reference for the group and is usually a learning experience for group members as they share their knowledge base about the strengths and leadership within Minnesota. The more common focus of identifying barriers often does not lead to creative strategies to address those barriers, and the negative focus on barriers can make it more difficult to brainstorm on potential strategies toward better employment outcomes.

The third question - **“What Will It Take to Double Employment of Minnesotans with Disabilities by 2015?”** - is the core question for participants. It is a question originally posed by the Alliance for Full Participation and, with their permission, adopted by MEPI. It is intended to be provocative by challenging participants to think out of the box and move toward strategies that can have a more dramatic effect on employment outcomes.

Listening Sessions on Transition

Two listening sessions on transition were facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative. One was hosted by the Northwest Hennepin and the West/South Hennepin Community Transition Interagency Committees (CTICs) on November 23, 2009 with eighteen participants. The other was hosted by the Bemidji CTIC on April 19, 2010 with eleven participants. MEPI also participated in the third summit of the Minnesota Employment First Coalition, which had 47 participants and brought together families and individuals with disabilities, many of whom discussed transition services. In addition, MEPI participated in a

presentation and discussion on the VECTOR/Minnesota Employment Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (MEC) transition program serving students who are deaf and hard of hearing on May 18, 2010 with thirteen participants. Transition was also a topic discussed by listening session participants in the eight disability groups identified earlier, even though it was not presented as a topic by MEPI in those listening sessions.

The responses below to the questions on “Why is work important?” and “What’s working? What are we doing right in Minnesota to facilitate employment?” are taken from the two CTIC listening sessions. The recommendations on “What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?” are taken from all the events described above.

Why is work important?

- Self-esteem
- Identity
- Feeling normal
- Structure
- Sense of purpose
- Keeps you busy
- Sanity
- Sense of pride
- Something to do
- Independence
- Money
- Sense of responsibility
- Provides opportunities to meet people and be social
- It changes people’s perceptions about people with disabilities and what they can accomplish.

What’s working? What are we doing right in Minnesota?

- County and agency funding supports
- Post-school services, vocational rehabilitation, supported employment providers

- Learning from the past and moving forward. We have a better perspective based on history.
- Increased community-based vs. center-based employment.
- Transition programs and high school work experience programs. School work programs, volunteering, on-the-job training, job shadowing. Working with social skills and communication on the job.
- Employers and non-profit organizations are more accepting and supportive.
- Minnesota has more services available than other states.
- There are more resources available for individuals with disabilities for increasing self-advocacy, self-esteem and independence.
- There are more types of work available now, so opportunities are not as limited.
- Families are not settling for less than what they want and are strong advocates. They are more active partners and understand the system.
- Transportation options have increased. More options at the community provider level.
- There are a variety of placement program options focusing on employment, including services for individuals with more significant disabilities.
- Collaboration between schools, vocational rehabilitation, providers and counties. CTICs promote better collaboration.
- CTICs have developed interagency referral processes and job expos. They link people to needed services and are a catalyst to start the process early.
- Person-centered planning. Matching people to jobs improves success.
- Vocational assessments are an ongoing process in schools with links to vocational rehabilitation and providers. There is a good process for gathering information on abilities by ninth grade.
- The Minnesota Work Incentives Connection convinces people that work is a viable option.
- Tax incentives for employers help in “cold-calling” employers to get their attention.
- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and state laws provide direction on what to do for transition.
- More educational opportunities to continue learning through postsecondary education and training.
- Employer education and relationships with employers have improved. Employers are more comfortable hiring people with disabilities. Work coordinators have developed long-term relationships with employers.

- The system for transition is set up.
- Summer work opportunities provide work experience and sometimes they lead to permanent employment.

What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?

The following recommendations are based on themes identified from the responses of listening session participants. The recommendations are not prioritized. The discussion that follows the nine recommendations provides further information on “next steps” in refining the recommendations and moving toward more specific policy implications.

Ensure families have expectations of competitive employment for their children with disabilities. The expectation of future employment for children without disabilities is nearly universal for families. This expectation starts at birth and extends into adulthood. Families participating in the Minnesota Employment First Family Summit said that they started out with the expectation their child with a disability would work, but that this goal eroded over time as professionals discouraged them from seeking competitive employment for their children. However, not all parents have even that initial expectation for their children with disabilities. As MEPI has learned from each listening session, expectations of employment are the key to achieving better employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Everything starts - or stops - with the expectation that a working-age adult has something to contribute to the workforce, community, and his or her self-support through competitive employment. If employment is an expectation for young adults without disabilities, it should also be an expectation for young adults with disabilities.

Utilize social connections, or “social capital”, during job development to achieve better employment outcomes and to empower families during transition. Families have a number of social connections and use those connections to find employment for themselves and for their children without disabilities. Social connections and active networking are important for anyone to find employment, regardless of whether or not he or she has a disability. By refocusing the family’s natural role to employment referrals, contacts, and linkages, the job development process will be better designed to empower families, in addition to improving connections and opportunities to employment outcomes in support of their family member.

Ensure students with disabilities have real jobs for real pay while they are still attending school. There is no substitute for having a real job. Transition research has documented a positive correlation between the number of paid jobs held by youth with disabilities and future competitive employment outcomes. A job is a powerful learning experience for a young person. It is the best way to learn about work and to start building a resume for future jobs. Students with more significant disabilities often have “work experiences” which are often unpaid and can

be artificially created experiences that take place within the school setting or in groups in the community, rather than having real jobs while in school, like other teenagers. While there is value in work experiences, they provide a limited opportunity for learning. There is usually no interview or selection process. Expectations are not the same as working directly for an employer for wages. In many work experiences, students are isolated from the paid workforce at the place of business and therefore from many of the social aspects of a job. As a result they do not learn some of the “soft” skills vital to successful employment or the direct connection and rewards of paid employment and work.

Ensure young adults with disabilities graduate directly and seamlessly into competitive jobs or postsecondary education. Students who do not have a job and/or are not enrolled in a postsecondary education program are less likely to ever find competitive employment. The goal of transition planning should be for individuals to secure employment or postsecondary education, and there is no evidence to suggest those outcomes are better achieved after graduation. In fact, considerable research indicates that graduating without achieving those outcomes correlates highly with a future of unemployment. A focus on post-school jobs or further education should also drive more targeted IEP objectives on career development.

When students graduate, they lose their connection to the schools and to some of the people who know them best. Transition teams supporting students and their families are more complete and have a better structure for interagency collaboration while students are still in school. Graduating into jobs or postsecondary education would be a valid measure of how well transition services are working, not just for the schools, but also for the adult service delivery system. Also, teams which have already worked together to secure jobs while students are still attending school, as discussed in the previous recommendation, will be better positioned to meet this goal.

Redesign transition services for young adults aged 18-21 to produce better employment and postsecondary education outcomes through interagency collaboration. Considerable resources have been invested in extending educational services for some young adults with disabilities until they are age 21. Questions remain about the effectiveness of those services and whether those years are optimally productive given the low rates of competitive employment and of completion of postsecondary educational programs for young adults. It is time to address those questions and encourage a dialogue to improve transition services and seamless employment results in support of extended time students. Does access to extended time, effort, and educational resources truly result in outcomes of increased competitive employment, adult community living, and economic self-reliance? Would a system of new policies and evidence-based practices increase opportunities for transition-aged youth to obtain their first adult job following graduation? How can Minnesota move toward more individualized targeted outcomes for students in which services for students aged 18-21 are not merely a continuation of secondary educational services with eventual placement into existing options within the adult delivery system? Would access to postsecondary options with additional supports during extended

education years to “try out” postsecondary education provide a bridge to more successful postsecondary education outcomes?

Accountability for results is critical. A system in which there are shared responsibilities for achieving employment or postsecondary education upon graduation may be more effective than a system in which the schools are viewed as having responsibility for transition outcomes until individuals graduate into the adult service delivery system. Listening session attendees made one thing abundantly clear-- when young adults graduate into jobs or postsecondary education directly and seamlessly, everyone benefits.

The five recommendations above are specific to transition; however, the following four recommendations would also apply to adults with disabilities in general.

Utilize alternative processes to achieve employment outcomes. As discussed earlier, the traditional job development process achieves poor outcomes for jobseekers with disabilities, especially those with significant disabilities. Alternative strategies are being explored such as customized employment,²⁰ self-employment, job restructuring and others. To double the rate of employment for individuals with disabilities, it will be important to explore and build on promising practices to secure and maintain employment. Merely perpetuating or expanding current practices will have a negligible impact on improving results.

Ensure ongoing supports are available to individuals who need them to obtain and retain employment. Supported employment assumes the need for ongoing supports, especially to address retention issues that may arise on the job. Many individuals with disabilities are not eligible for supported employment services and lose jobs as a result. The service delivery system must have a more flexible capacity to work with employers and individuals when problems arise to avoid job loss and unnecessarily reinstate the job development process (and a sometimes lengthy period of unemployment). By incorporating a rapid response capacity within the range of services and supports delivered by existing supported employment providers in Minnesota, employers and their employees can access timely supports they need to stabilize employment retention or redirect the individual to a job better suited to their skills, needs, and changing circumstances.

Ensure lifelong learning opportunities are available to individuals for ongoing career development and advancement. Training and educational opportunities are increasingly a fact

²⁰ Customized employment (CE) as defined by the Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) means “individualizing the employment relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. It is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs and interests of the person with a disability, and is also designed to meet the specific needs of the employer.” For more information on CE visit www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/CustomizedEmployment/what/index.htm.

of life for all workers in an ever-changing economy. Most individuals with or without disabilities will have multiple careers during their working years. Training and educational opportunities that accommodate individuals with disabilities are critical if they are to achieve access to the economic opportunities available to individuals without disabilities.

Engage business leaders in demand-side training and career development strategies to ensure that unique learners with disabilities are preparing for careers in emerging economies where there will be a high demand for their skills in good paying jobs. The underemployment of Minnesotans with disabilities is often impacted by a lack of career development opportunities within emerging economies. For this reason, it is important to engage business leaders in promising strategies that prepare jobseekers with disabilities with skills in high demand occupations. Some of this job preparation means making improvements and adaptations within postsecondary education programs, so unique learners can participate. However, it also means engaging contextualized learning on the job through internships, apprenticeships, and other “hands-on” job training models so unique learners can develop and practice the skills and competencies they need to obtain good paying jobs through both conventional job development and negotiated customized employment.

Implications for Policy

The information gathered on transition and from the eight listening sessions specific to particular disability groups is being analyzed to identify commonalities and compiled into a final report of recommendations across age and disability groups. Representatives from the organizations which hosted listening sessions will then be reconvened to strategize on addressing the policy implications of improving employment outcomes. From these strategies, a more specific set of recommendations for action will be developed to move toward doubling the employment rate of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015.

About the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative

The purpose of the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) is to facilitate dialogue and develop leadership on disability and employment policy that will result in increased competitive employment of Minnesotans with disabilities and promote the proposition: “We need everyone in the workforce for businesses to thrive and communities to prosper.” Central to this initiative is the belief that employment is fundamental to adulthood, quality of life, and economic freedom

and choice. MEPI is an initiative of Pathways to Employment (PTE), Minnesota's Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, funded from 2009 to 2010²¹

In January 2011, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) reported that only 20.1% of individuals with disabilities were employed. The employment rate for individuals without disabilities was 69.5%. That translates into an employment rate in which individuals with disabilities are employed at a rate that is less than one-third of the employment rate of individuals without disabilities. The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative is working across disability groups to close that gap by identifying strategies that will benefit all Minnesotans with disabilities in addition to strengthening and building new alliances to enlarge the circle of employment champions.

Leadership for MEPI comes from National APSE - The Network on Employment - in concert with its state chapter, Minnesota APSE.²² The initiative works with numerous stakeholders to align policies, services, and practices to ensure that integrated competitive employment is widely recognized and routinely promoted as the preferred outcome of all Minnesotans with disabilities. MEPI also works in close collaboration with the Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (www.mntat.org) to maximize the impact of employment policy and practice across Minnesota.

Additional policy briefs and reports will be available as they are developed at the MEPI website, www.mn-epi.org.

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²¹ To learn more about PTE visit www.positivelyminnesota.com/pte.

²² For the APSE website, visit www.apse.org. For the Minnesota APSE website, visit www.mnapse.org.

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