Abstract
In 2007, the low level of young adults with developmental disabilities who were employed in the 3 months postgraduation from high school led the Washington State legislature to authorize and fund the Jobs by 21 Partnership Project. The intent of the project was to identify and demonstrate best practices in sustainable partnerships among Washington State’s school and adult service systems. Results indicated that participants in the project were more likely to be employed following school exit and had stronger employment outcomes than students who did not participate. Further, data suggest that improved employment outcomes were supported by the leveraging and maximization of financial and in-kind resources and the strengthening of collaborative relationships across project stakeholders.

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Over 20 years ago, Hasazi, Johnson, Hasazi, Gordon, and Hull (1989) noted that there is evidence of a relationship between participating in paid employment while enrolled in high school and postgraduation individual employment outcomes; however, there is limited evidence of a national commitment to ensuring postgraduation community employment outcomes for students with developmental disabilities. Based upon data reported in Wave 3 of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), in 2005, only 31% of youth with mental retardation out of secondary school a year or more had a paid job outside the home at the time of their interview compared with 66% of similarly aged youth with no disabilities (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). Others have also noted a low rate of employment for young adults with disabilities (Certo et al., 2008). These low rates of employment persist despite the work of stakeholders from various disciplines to develop a variety of strategies to ensure that individuals with developmental disabilities are supported to transition from school to employment (Certo et al., 2008; Luecking & Certo, 2002).

Models for strengthening the transition from school to employment and adult life emphasize early collaboration between the school and adult service systems, and a direct focus on employment (Certo et al., 2003; Certo et al., 2008; Luecking & Certo 2002). The Transition Service Integration Model emphasizes collaboration among the education, rehabilitation, and developmental disability service systems and partnership between school and community rehabilitation provider staff with a goal of establishing a paid integrated job and inclusive community activities during the last year of school services (Certo et al., 2003; Luecking & Certo, 2002). Funding support for these services is shared across the school and adult service systems. The goal is a seamless transition, where an adult life is established prior to completing school exit. Certo et al. (2003) reported that 63% of young adults involved in this model exited school with a paid community job, and 88% exited with a seamless transition, defined as no break between services.

Similar efforts have been made at the state level as well. Delaware’s Early Start to Supported Employment Project also achieved positive results.
by increasing cooperation between the school and adult service systems (Freeze, 2008). With collaboration among education, rehabilitation, and the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services, students are helped to begin a job search with the support of a community rehabilitation provider from the adult service system as they begin their last year of school services. In Maryland the Governor's Transitioning Youth Initiative has worked to develop collaborative funding strategies between the developmental disabilities agency and the vocational rehabilitation agency. Since 1989, the initiative has supported the funding needed for more than 4,500 students exiting high school to obtain supported employment and other day services (Gauruder, 2007). Massachusetts is also working to support increased collaboration between the school and adult service systems. Developers of the Massachusetts Disability Employment Initiative (2009) have proposed the creation of a statewide public/private partnership to collaboratively support youth and adults with disabilities living in the state to pursue employment.

The low level of integrated employment for young adults with developmental disabilities in Washington State has mirrored the national trend. Billing and reporting data collected by the state's Division of Developmental Disabilities in 2007 indicated that most young adults (87%) who were eligible for these services were not employed in the 3 months after graduation from high school. This was especially concerning to stakeholders because in Washington integrated employment is the preferred outcome for all adults served by the Division of Developmental Disabilities (Washington Department of Social and Health Services, Division of Developmental Disabilities, 2004). The Working Age Adult Policy “establishes employment supports as the primary use of employment/day program funds for working age adults” and emphasizes community employment as the primary service option. County developmental disability agencies are responsible for implementing the policy at the local level.

Prior to becoming eligible for Division of Developmental Disabilities funded services, individuals with developmental disabilities are guaranteed services from their local school district under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA), which legislates that all individuals with disabilities are entitled to educational programming through age 21 and that students between the ages of 16 and 21 years begin planning for their transition from secondary education to adult services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004).

Recognizing that the majority of young adults in Washington were not making a direct transition from school to employment, the state legislature authorized $2,000,000 for the Jobs by 21 Partnership Project for the 2007–2009 biennium. The Division of Developmental Disabilities was authorized by the legislature to identify and demonstrate best practices in sustainable partnerships among Washington State’s school districts, counties, employers, families, students with developmental disabilities, and adult service agencies. To implement the project, the agency requested that county level developmental disability offices apply for funds from the Partnership Project. Criteria were developed by state Division of Developmental Disabilities administrative staff and were distributed statewide, and all county developmental disability offices were encouraged to apply for an award. In fiscal year (FY) 2008, the first year that Jobs by 21 Partnership Project funds were available, nine counties applied, and all were awarded Partnership Project funds. In the second year of the project, FY 2009, criteria were again distributed statewide, and all county developmental disability offices were encouraged to apply for an award. Eleven counties across the state in a variety of geographic areas were awarded the funds; each of the nine original counties who received awards in FY 2008 and two additional counties. A total of $500,000 per fiscal year was allocated across counties that were awarded funds.

The goals of the Partnership Project were to (a) capitalize on the IDEIA requirement that students have a postschool outcome plan; (b) expand and improve upon individual county’s existing efforts at collaboration; (c) establish a statewide partnership between Division of Developmental Disabilities, counties, and schools to enable students to make use of the supports available while still enrolled in school in order to achieve employment upon matriculation; and (d) ensure that counties and school districts make use of job training and job preparation opportunities, labor market guides, workforce development trends, and postgraduation outcome reports to achieve postschool employment objectives for transition age students with developmental disabilities. Counties were encouraged to
develop collaborative relationships and activities between stakeholders that best met their local needs.

Stakeholders targeted by the project for collaborative activities were the Division of Developmental Disabilities, county developmental disability offices, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, school administrators and teachers, employment vendors, family members, and young adults. Consistent with the research literature, counties who participated in the project were required to incorporate memorandums of understanding with collaborative community partners focused on young adult job seekers and to develop specific employment and career activities that incorporated both school personnel and adult supported employment vendors. The projects were also required to establish a focus on information and outreach, including (a) the provision of Social Security Benefits Training for job seekers; (b) transition fairs for young adults and their families; (c) the dissemination of information about transition and postsecondary education opportunities for young adults; (d) technical assistance and training for teachers, employment vendors, families, students, and other stakeholders; (e) peer mentor groups or job clubs for young adults; and (f) employer-related initiatives targeting young adult job seekers.

**Method**

**Participants**

County developmental disability agencies who received Partnership Project funds were responsible for making connections with local school districts and identifying individuals who would be eligible to participate in local projects. Participating students must be turning 21 years of age during their final year of high school and be eligible for Division of Developmental Disabilities funded services. Eligible individuals were invited, but not required, to participate. In FY 2008, the 9 counties that received project funds collaborated with 55 school districts and nearly 35% of students who were eligible participated. In FY 2009, the 11 counties that received project funds collaborated with 66 school districts and 40% of students who were eligible participated. The Division of Developmental Disabilities contracted with the Institute for Community Inclusion to conduct an evaluation of the Partnership Project. Working in conjunction with Division of Developmental Disabilities staff, we developed research questions and implemented data-collection procedures that were focused on the assessment of employment outcomes for young adults with developmental disabilities and collaboration between system stakeholders.

**Research Questions**

We developed research questions to address both individual outcomes and the identification of promising practices in county project design and implementation. Questions were: What was the impact of connecting young adults to employment vendors prior to graduation? How were resources maximized across the school and adult service systems? What strategies were most effective in encouraging collaboration between school and adult service systems?

Assessing employment outcomes for young adults with developmental disabilities. We used several methods to collect employment outcome data for participants. Data were collected from the Washington Division of Developmental Disabilities Case Management Information System and from individual employment outcomes forms developed by staff at the Institute for Community Inclusion and the Division of Developmental Disabilities project manager and completed by county developmental disability project staff. We also asked these staff members to complete a form developed to assess students’ career development experiences during their involvement in the Partnership Project. The Division of Developmental Disabilities project manager reviewed and provided feedback on the individual employment outcomes form and career development experiences form.

Assessing collaboration between system stakeholders. We asked county developmental disability project staff members to complete a structured interview questionnaire describing their county’s Partnership Project activities. The Division of Developmental Disabilities project manager reviewed the completed questionnaire with project staff members from each county and, in some cases, solicited additional information. The project manager incorporated the additional information into the structured interview questionnaire and gave each county project representative the opportunity to review and amend the questionnaire before labeling the document as final. Information gathered from the structured interviews was enhanced by information collected by the evaluator through in-person interviews and focus
groups with stakeholders from Partnership Project counties. Stakeholders included county developmental disability staff, state and local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation staff, school administrators and teachers, employment vendors, family members, and young adults who had obtained jobs.

**Results**

Participants in the Partnership Project were more likely to be employed following school exit and had stronger employment outcomes than did students who were not participants. Data on project implementation from the structured interviews as well as in-person interviews and focus groups suggest that improved employment outcomes were supported by the leveraging and maximization of financial and in-kind resources and strengthened collaborative relationships across project stakeholders.

**Employment Outcomes**

The employment outcomes in the first 3 months after graduation for students who graduated in June 2008 and June 2009 and participated in their counties’ Partnership Projects were compared to students who graduated in June 2008 and June 2009 in all Washington counties but who did not participate in the project (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). **Partnership project participants** were defined as Division of Developmental Disabilities eligible students who lived in counties that received Partnership Project funds and who participated in their county’s project. **Nonparticipants** were defined as Division of Developmental Disabilities eligible students who lived in counties that received Partnership Project funds but did not participate in their county’s project. **No Partnership Project county clients** were Division of Developmental Disabilities eligible students who lived in counties that did not receive Partnership Project funds.

In FY 2008, postgraduation Partnership Project participants were more likely to earn wages after their graduation from high school than were their peers who did not participate. Forty-five percent of individuals who participated had wage and hour data reported to Division of Developmental Disabilities in the fiscal quarter July 1 through September 30, 2008, compared with 6% of nonparticipants. Only 7% of young adults in counties with no Partnership Project had wage and hour data reported for the first quarter following their graduation from high school. During this same period, Partnership Project participants, on average, earned higher wages, worked more hours, and were more likely to be working in an individual job in the community than were individuals in either of the other groups. In the 3 months after graduation from high school, young adults with developmental disabilities who participated in the Partnership Project earned higher monthly wages ($M = 1,185) than did individuals in the other groups (nonparticipants and counties with no Partnership Project ($M_s = 901 and 560, respectively).

In FY 2008, in the 3 months after graduation from high school, young adults with developmental disabilities who participated in the Partnership Project, on average, worked more hours per month ($M = 140 hr) than did individuals in the other groups (nonparticipants and counties with no Partnership Project clients ($M_s = 113 and 110 hr, respectively). An additional difference between groups was the dominant setting where individuals were employed. Partnership Project participants were more likely to be employed in an individual job in the community (86%) compared with nonparticipants (77%) and counties with no Partnership Project clients (28.5%). Other employment settings included group supported employment, person-to-person services (community-based nonwork), and prevocational employment (sheltered workshop).

**Table 1** Employment Outcomes for FY 2008 Based on Data Reported to the Division of Developmental Disabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Total individuals in target group</th>
<th>No. employed</th>
<th>Mean hours a</th>
<th>Mean wages b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PP c participants</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>1,185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonparticipants in PP counties</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No PP county clients</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>560</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

 aPer month. bIn dollars per month. cPartnership Project.
Young adults who graduated in June 2009 were negatively affected by the state's budget crisis. The FY 2010 Division of Developmental Disabilities budget did not allocate state dollars to serve new entrants to the service system who did not qualify for Medicaid Waiver funded services. Subsequently, without the assurance of Division of Developmental Disabilities funded employment services available for ongoing support after job placement, many local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation offices did not open individual employment plans for students participating in the Partnership Project who were eligible for Division of Developmental Disabilities funded services but could not identify a funding source for long-term employment supports. This was in spite of the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation office's efforts to ensure that local vocational rehabilitation offices opened employment plans for Division of Developmental Disabilities eligible clients. Without the ability to braid Division of Developmental Disabilities and Division of Vocational Rehabilitation funds, significantly fewer students were placed in jobs in the spring of 2009.

Despite the fact that fewer individuals who graduated in June 2009 were employed 3 months postgraduation, those who participated in the Partnership Project were employed at a higher percentage (11%) than were nonparticipants (0.6%) and counties with no Partnership Project clients (5%). Although, on average, Partnership Project participants did not work more hours than counties with no Partnership Project clients, they did, on average, earn more money than did individuals in the other groups ($689 compared to $334 for nonparticipants and $427 for counties with no Partnership Project clients). During the second year of the project, an overwhelming percentage of Partnership Project participants were employed in individual jobs in the community (92%) compared with counties with no Partnership Project clients (20%). There were two Partnership Project nonparticipants who were employed in the 3 months postgraduation, and both had obtained individual jobs in the community.

### Systems Outcomes

Representatives of participating counties provided a summary of engagement in strategies that related to the project model components and also discussed the role and impact of these strategies in their responses to the semi-structured interview questionnaire. In addition, state Division of Developmental Disabilities and Division of Vocational Rehabilitation staff, county developmental disability staff, and other stakeholders participated in interviews and focus groups conducted in the fall of 2008 and spring of 2009. Key themes that emerged

### Table 2 Employment Setting Based Upon Data Reported to the Division of Developmental Disabilities (in Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Individual employment</th>
<th>Group-supported employment</th>
<th>Person-to-person services</th>
<th>Prevocational services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PP participants</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP nonparticipants</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No PP county clients</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Partnership Project.

### Table 3 Employment Outcomes for FY 2009 Based Upon Data Reported to the Division of Developmental Disabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Total individuals in target group</th>
<th>No. employed</th>
<th>Mean hours</th>
<th>Mean wages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PP participants</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonparticipants in PP counties</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No PP county clients</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Per month. In dollars per month. Partnership Project.
from these sources included the importance of: maximizing resources, developing formal collaborative partnerships, and obtaining employment services prior to graduation from high school. These themes appeared consistently across all counties participating in the project; however, because counties were encouraged to develop interventions that best met their local needs, differences occurred in the specific actions that were implemented. Actions that were only undertaken by a select number of counties are identified as such throughout this section.

Maximization of Resources

Data collected from administration of the structured interview questionnaires indicated that the availability of Partnership Project funds was found to encourage stakeholders from the school and adult service systems to contribute additional dollars and in-kind resources to the project. The school system includes local school districts and regional Educational Service Districts. The adult service system includes county developmental disability offices, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Work Source Center, adult employment vendors, local community colleges, and local businesses.

County Partnership Projects leveraged money across systems to support integrated employment for students graduating in June 2008 and June 2009. With a total of $500,000 in Partnership Project funds each fiscal year, counties reported leveraging an additional $556,346 in FY 2008 and an additional $1,188,152 in FY 2009 across school and adult service systems to support employment outcomes for graduating students. The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation was a significant financial contributor both years and provided funding for individuals to receive employment services prior to graduation from high school. County Partnership Projects also leveraged in-kind resources received from the school system, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, community colleges, employment vendors, and employers. In-kind resources included meeting space, staff time, employment assessments, and transportation for young adults to employment sites. Stakeholders from the adult service system noted that they viewed the donation of resources to the project as the cost of doing business with young adults prior to their graduation from high school.

Collaborative Relationships

The process of leveraging resources helped to bring together stakeholders to collectively commit to achieving employment outcomes and problem solve. One county developmental disability coordinator noted that the Partnership Project taught stakeholders “the importance of bridging resources.” This led each group to “appreciate what each system does.”

Information collected during the in-person interviews and focus groups supports the presumption that the process of leveraging resources supported the development of collaborative relationships between county developmental disability offices, local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation offices, local school districts, students and their families, and employment vendors and led to a better understanding of the available services and constraints faced by each group. Activities that occurred as a result of these relationships included supporting individuals to apply for adult services and benefits, participating in transition counseling, facilitating a coordinated interagency transition to adult services, making use of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation’s expertise and resources, and improving teacher competencies for transition and employment. The Partnership Project’s requirement that students become eligible and apply for Division of Developmental Disabilities services provided a natural opportunity for the school and adult service systems to collaborate to provide information to individuals and families about applying for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and Medicaid as well as information about the opportunity to engage in Work Incentives Planning and Assistance; in FY 2009, at least 70% of individuals in four counties with Partnership Projects participated in work incentives planning.

Initiating the application for these services while individuals were still enrolled in school ensured that individuals and their families received accurate information about the ways in which social welfare benefits interact with employment and how Work Incentives Planning and Assistance can be used to maximize economic self-sufficiency. In addition, in FY 2009 for students who were eligible for Division of Developmental Disabilities funded services but to whom no dollars had been allocated, one county used Work Incentives Planning and Assistance to help identify potential
funding for employment support services. A Social Security Benefits Specialist met with each employment provider agency and student who was not enrolled in a Medicaid Waiver. Families, students, and providers were given information on how to access and implement the use of Social Security Work Incentives. The experience of this county was that although the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance process was beneficial, Social Security Plans for Achieving Self Support (PASS) and Impairment Related Work Expense plans were not viable strategies to support for young adults who worked very few hours per week.

Cross-system planning conducted through county-based transition councils occurred in several counties and was also found to facilitate the transition to employment. Transition councils were described by stakeholders in several counties as a catalyst to share information and resources, provide training and technical assistance, and to facilitate discussion among stakeholders. For example, one county shared that the council meetings provided an opportunity for employment vendors to request that school districts become less territorial with their work experience sites so that a good work experience can become a paid individualized job. Several counties with Partnership Projects also engaged in additional efforts to support inter-agency transition planning. One county subcontracted with personal agents to facilitate the introduction to adult services, while other larger counties employed part-time or full-time transition coordinators to assist young adults and their families with the transition to the postschool world. The focus of these efforts included sharing information on funding, service eligibility, benefits analysis, job discovery, employment service vendors, and Person Centered Planning. School districts in one county have taken the additional step of instituting a planning tool to facilitate the transition from school to adulthood and to support individuals and families to create and identify the specific supports that the student will use postgraduation. The focus on developing an interagency plan prior to graduation was found by the county to help ensure that the transition process was smooth and that connections were developed between the adult service world and secondary education system. Stakeholders shared that the outcome of these efforts has been that individuals and families are less apprehensive about the transition to adulthood.

The state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation office was an active partner in the Partnership Project during both FYs 2008 and 2009; however, in FY 2009, as described in the section Employment Outcomes, very few students received Division of Vocational Rehabilitation funded services prior to their exit from high school. During both fiscal years, the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation office offered guidance to local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and county developmental disability offices on the role of the local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation office’s school transition liaison’s role around supporting young adults to transition from school to employment. Further, the individual client data exchange agreement between the Division of Developmental Disabilities and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation allowed these systems to share information about young adults with developmental disabilities who were pursuing employment. In addition, several county developmental disability agencies developed formal memorandums of understanding with their local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation office to support the blending and braiding of funds. These memorandums detail expected employment outcomes and Division of Vocational Rehabilitation payment points for the completion of employment services for transition age youth. County developmental disability agencies, local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation offices, and school districts worked together to develop a more unified vision of how to best support students to transition from school to work. State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation staff noted that the Partnership Project has expanded their knowledge of the types of employment services young adults are receiving from the school system. Counties also found that developing and establishing strong relationships between students with developmental disabilities and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation was an important outcome of the Partnership Project.

During FY 2009, more than 70% of Partnership Project students in six counties met with a Division of Vocational Rehabilitation counselor prior to their final year of school. One local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation staff member noted that in his or her region there was substantial excitement and enthusiasm around the Partnership Project, supporting schools to become invested in employment outcomes, and a renewed focus on connecting the goals of the Rehabilitation Act and the IDEIA.
Further, this Division of Vocational Rehabilitation staff member reported that the need for long-term employment support has been reduced for some young adults because they are able to obtain employment and develop natural supports in the workplace while still enrolled in high school.

Prior to the Partnership Project, multiple stakeholders reported that most school districts faced structural and informational barriers to supporting students with developmental disabilities to expect, learn about, and access adult employment services. Several educators participating in the Partnership Project shared that they experienced a steep learning curve when they began working with transition age students and that prior to their involvement with the project did not fully understand the expectations related to the participation of young adults with developmental disabilities in the labor force. The Partnership Project served as a catalyst to bring schools and the county developmental disability staff together to work toward the common goal of a transition from school to employment for students with developmental disabilities. Through project resources, training on transition and employment were made available to special education teachers.

Teachers across the counties attended instructional presentations on the following topics: adult service programs, developing a transition individualized education plan (IEP), customized employment, career or person-centered planning, and systematic instruction. Training resources, both internal and external to the state, were used by Partnership Project counties. Trainings were provided by the Division of Developmental Disabilities, county developmental disability agency staff, local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation staff, Educational Service District staff, O'Neill and Associates, Washington Initiative for Supported Employment, Washington State Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, and national experts in transition and employment. Also, special education teachers have enrolled in the Employment Professional Certificate Program offered through Highline Community College and a similar program offered by Educational Service District 112 in Clark County. Statewide, the reported outcomes of providing instruction to teachers on transition and employment have been positive, and teachers feel more confident in their ability to write IEP goals to support employment outcomes and to participate in transition planning.

Early Engagement With Adult Employment Supports

The importance of selecting an employment vendor while an individual is still in high school and obtaining paid employment was another important outcome. Division of Developmental Disabilities funded employment services are not authorized to begin until the July after individuals reach 21 years of age and exit school; therefore, before the Partnership Project, students were not typically introduced to postschool employment support opportunities until after exiting high school. The delay in selecting an employment vendor and obtaining paid employment that could be sustained when the individual graduated from high school led to an incomplete transfer of information from the school system to the adult service system, a loss of employment skills developed while the individual was enrolled in high school, and uncertainty about the adult service system and the expectations of the Division of Developmental Disabilities regarding employment. Several different models were used to connect students to adult employment vendors and obtain a sustainable employment placement prior to graduation from high school, including sponsoring vendor fairs with the expectation that the student would immediately begin pursuing employment services, the direct contracting of an employment vendor by the school to serve all transition age students, student participation in formal and informal Project Search models, and the enrollment of students in formal transition programs administered by their local school district and community colleges. Partnership Project stakeholders shared that when schools collaborated with an employment vendor prior to graduation that the quality of employment services and outcomes improved. Reasons for the improvement in service quality include (a) vendors no longer miss information from school and begin interacting with students during the school day in an environment where the individual is comfortable, (b) job development and placement services begin at an age typical to their peers without disabilities, and (c) individuals and families make a smoother transition from school to work.

Discussion

The results of the Partnership Project reinforce the findings of previous researchers that the development of collaborative relationships combined with
early engagement with adult employment supports can lead to an improvement in the transition from school to employment (Brown, 2009; Certo et al., 2008; Luecking & Certo, 2002; Muthumbi, 2008). The Partnership Project experience also highlights the importance of other elements in a comprehensive approach, including development of cross-system planning initiatives, dissemination of information to individuals and families at multiple times and in multiple venues throughout the transition process, and the development of teacher competencies.

The importance of cross-system transition planning has been widely documented in the literature (Certo et al., 2008; Condon & Callahan, 2008). Condon and Callahan emphasized the importance of school and adult services working together to improve transition outcomes: “For these reasons and many others, transition planning that incorporates IEP team assistance in forging early links between schools, adult services, funding agencies, families, and individuals with disabilities is essential to post-school employment success” (p. 95). Models of transition, such as the Transition Service Integration Model described by Luecking and Certo (2002), are specifically focused on the importance of combining school and adult service resources to ensure a successful transition from school to work. Efforts by Partnership Project counties indicate that the state of Washington is working towards implementing cross-system transition planning. Strategies such as the leveraging of monetary and nonmonetary resources, transition councils, coordinated cross-system hand-off to adult services, supporting individuals to select and work with an employment service vendor prior to graduation, and the use of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation’s expertise and resources to facilitate individual transitions to employment have been especially valuable to efforts to improve employment outcomes.

The Partnership Project has been important in supporting professional development for special education teachers on the topic of transition and employment. Although training methods and topics varied across counties, the overall focus on providing special education teachers with information was consistent with practices identified in the literature. Muthumbi (2008) also found that improving teachers’ knowledge of the employment service system led to their better use of the system. Further, the focus on training teachers to conduct employment planning and support job-sampling, job carves, and nontraditional jobs is in line with recommendations from Condon and Callahan (2008), who recommended that schools transition from relying on adult employment agencies as the sole vendor of paid employment opportunities. Providing education about applying for SSI, SSDI, and Medicaid as well as information about Work Incentives Planning and Assistance ensured that young adults and their families received accurate information about the ways in which social welfare benefits interact with employment and how benefits planning can be used to maximize the individual’s income. This was also consistent with practices identified in the literature; for example, O’Day and Stapleton (2009) noted the importance of benefits counseling on individuals’ understanding of the positive ways in which employment and income supports can interact to maximize income potential.

**Limitations**

There are limitations to this study. Stakeholders in counties that did not participate in the Partnership Project were not asked to complete the structured interview questionnaire nor did they participate in interviews and focus groups. It is possible that these counties did engage in collaborative efforts similar to counties with Partnership Projects but that these efforts did not result in employment outcomes that were equal to or greater than the outcomes produced by the Partnership Project. A second limitation is that we did not complete interviews or focus groups with individuals who resided in counties with Partnership Projects and who chose not to participate in the project. It is possible that these individuals chose not to participate because they were seeking adult experiences other than employment. If this is the case, it is not surprising that this group of individuals would have lower rates of employment than individuals who participated in the project. Finally, these results do not include longer term data on the employment status of project participants.

**Implications**

Stakeholders in Partnership Project counties bridged the gap between school to work by involving multiple stakeholders and by instituting changes in their actions at various points of the young adult’s life span. Lessons learned from the Partnership Project suggest that although the state
of Washington counties involved in the project have begun to institute policies and practices to support a smooth transition to employment for young adults with developmental disabilities, continued efforts at the state and local level are needed to ensure that all are able to successfully enter the workforce and consistently obtain employment prior to their graduation from high school.

State level. At the state level, administrators of the Division of Developmental Disabilities, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction should review policies and practices regarding employment supports for transition age students. Further, these entities should develop memorandums of understanding that specifically outline the expectations for how each group’s resources at the state and local level will interact to support individuals to obtain employment prior to graduation and sustain employment once they graduate from high school. Instituting the expectation that these groups all share in the responsibility of supporting individuals to engage in employment planning and obtainment while still in high school will provide significant dividends at both an individual and systems level.

The differences in employment outcomes between fiscal years are, in part, related to the lack of funding for long-term employment supports from Division of Developmental Disabilities and the reluctance of local Division of Vocational Rehabilitation offices to open supported employment cases for individuals for whom there is no guarantee of Division of Developmental Disabilities funded long-term supports. The allocation of funds for long-term employment supports for new entrants into the adult service system should continue to occur at the state level for individuals who qualify for Division of Developmental Disabilities funded services, regardless of their ability to also qualify for Medicaid Waiver funded services. The state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation office should also continue to reach out to their local offices and support them to open supported employment cases for all individuals who qualify for Division of Developmental Disabilities funded services. Administrators at these local offices who are confident that an individual will be able to maintain a job in the community will ensure that young adults with a developmental disability will have access to Division of Vocational Rehabilitation funded supports and expertise in supported employment.

Local level. County developmental disability agencies, local vocational rehabilitation offices, and school districts should be supported to collaborate early and often to support the transition to employment. Such efforts should identify and follow students with the most significant disabilities at high school entry to develop and implement a transition plan for services to ensure that students graduate from school and directly enter the workforce. The focus should be to ensure that education curriculums integrate employment expectations and competencies, collaborate with the adult service system to ensure students are gaining work experience while in school, and develop and implement plans so that students are able to maintain employment postgraduation. An emphasis should also be placed on ensuring that individuals and their families receive education about applying for SSI, SSDI, and Medicaid as well as information about benefits planning. Assisting students to connect to an employment vendor is another effort that can be used at the local level to ensure that they have a smooth transition from school to work.

County developmental disability agencies, local vocational rehabilitation offices, and school districts can further facilitate this process by supporting the vendor to use their expertise to help guide the pregraduation employment process and identify resources to pay for pre- and postgraduation employment services. In addition, encouraging individuals and their families to develop a relationship with an employment provider and obtain a sustainable employment placement prior to graduation should be a primary focus of county developmental disability agencies, local vocational rehabilitation offices, and school districts.

Underlying the work of the county developmental disability agency, local vocational rehabilitation office, and school district is the special education teacher. Special education teachers across Washington would benefit from professional training on how to develop educational goals for transition age students that are grounded in the expectations that students will face during adulthood and that allow them to gain the skills they need to pursue their desired career. The co-sponsorship of trainings by county developmental disability offices, local vocational rehabilitation offices, employment vendors, and school districts could be used to provide professional development for special education teachers on the topic of the
transition of students with developmental disabilities to employment.

References


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