

# issue brief

## Do promising vocational interventions benefit at-risk youth?

The postsecondary employment outcomes reported for youth with disabilities in the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (Newman, Wagner, Cameto & Knoocy, 2009; Wagner, et al., 2005), the National Council on Disability (2008), and numerous others indicate persisting gaps in post high school employment outcomes for students with disabilities compared to their peers. The gaps are particularly apparent when comparing the outcomes of youth with disabilities from minority backgrounds to other youth (Newman et al., 2009).

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Examples of recent findings of the NLT (Wagner, et al., 2003) show despite significant gains overall employment rates continue to be lower for African American (42%) or Hispanic youth with disabilities (36%) than for white youth (62%). When employed, African American youth are more likely to earn lower wages than white youth. Furthermore, individuals with disabilities from low-income households are less likely to be employed than their counterparts from higher-income households, and more likely to earn lower wages. These findings are consistent with those found by Fabian (2007), which indicate that certain groups, in particular young Latin American women, were less likely to secure a job participating in a standardized youth transition employment program. When exploring employment outcomes for these same youth, Garcia-Iria, Fabricio, and Taylor-Ritzler, (2007) found that other factors aside from disability tend to limit the employment outcomes for these youth. Factors include poverty, lack of access

to services and scarce family support. Other studies corroborate the negative association between poverty and job placement/retention for youth with disabilities (e.g., Loprest & Wittenburg, 2007). Such circumstances place these youth at considerable risk of a cycle of lifelong unemployment and low socioeconomic achievement.

This brief will outline what is known about transition to employment interventions that are designed to mitigate poor postsecondary employment outcomes and discuss the gaps in current research knowledge about these interventions. Additionally, a study currently underway by the Center on Transition to Employment for Youth with Disabilities will be introduced. This study is designed to illuminate factors that are associated with a greater likelihood of youth with disabilities, especially those from minority backgrounds, getting and keeping employment.



## what we know

For all students, with and without disabilities, work-based learning has long been shown to improve students' self-esteem, to teach and reinforce basic academic and technical skills, to promote an understanding of workplace culture and expectations, and to develop a network for future job searches (Hoerner & Wehrley, 1995; Haimson & Bellotti, 2001; Wehman, 2006). In fact, paid work during the secondary school years has been consistently shown to be the strongest predictor of postsecondary employment success for youth with disabilities, regardless of disability label or intensity of special education services (e.g., Fabian, Lent & Willis, 1998; Colley & Jamison, 1998; Luecking & Fabian, 2000; Wagner, et al., 2006; Brown, Shiraga & Kessler, 2006). In a recent analysis of empirical studies of secondary education interventions, Test, et al. (2009) identified 16 evidenced-based predictors of post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities. Of these, paid employment/work experience was an important predictor of post-school employment. In another recent analysis of NLTS2 data, youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, who typically have the lowest employment rates among special education students who have exited secondary school, had significantly better post-school employment success when they experienced paid work in high school (Carter, Austin & Trainor, in press).

One promising intervention that has garnered research attention is the Bridges from School to Work program (Bridges) administered by the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities (Tilson, Luecking & Donovan, 1994). Operating since 1989, the Bridges program has provided services to over 15,000 youth with disabilities at seven metropolitan sites spanning the country. A substantial proportion of Bridges participants are from minority and low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, and therefore at risk for poorer post-school employment outcomes

(Fabian, 2007). Bridges is a standardized vocational intervention offered to youth with diverse disabilities in the year prior to school exit consisting of career counseling, job placement, and ongoing employment supports. Thus, this intervention targets exactly the kind of activity - paid work prior to school exit - that research has associated with adult employment success. While national reports (i.e., NCWD/Y, 2010) have cited the effectiveness of the Bridges intervention in improving post-school employment outcomes, there are small, but significant groups (i.e., Latinos, youth with severe emotional disabilities (SED)) who have not displayed similarly positive outcomes (Fabian, 2007; Luecking & Fabian, 2000).

Previous analyses of the Bridges database have identified diverse individual and environmental factors associated with successful employment outcomes. For example, Fabian (2007) found that ethnicity, having a career goal, and family SES related to securing a paid job in her analysis of over 2,000 students enrolled in six Bridges program sites and identified some students who did not benefit as much from this type of intervention. Fabian et al. (1998) were interested in whether work-related behaviors (such as absences, tardiness, etc.) accounted for differential employment outcomes for a Bridges sample, beyond disability and demographic factors. Luecking & Fabian (2000) examined employment retention for a sample of over 3,000 Bridges students in competitive employment, finding that type of disability, specifically having SED, decreased the likelihood of keeping a job. Garcia-Iriarte, Balcazar and Taylor-Ritzler (2007) found differential patterns of job and social support

What are the factors associated with a greater likelihood of youth with disabilities getting and keeping employment?

provided to youth depending on the severity of the disability.

While these Bridges studies and other similar vocational intervention outcome studies have demonstrated the significance of a paid employment experience in improving employment outcomes after high school (e.g., Carter, et al., in press; Test et al., 2008; NCD,

2008), few have focused specifically on at-risk groups, nor conducted comprehensive analyses of person and environmental characteristics associated with success in getting and keeping a job. There is a need to further identify these characteristics so that promising interventions can be identified, refined, and disseminated.

## advancing knowledge and practice

The Center on Transition to Employment for Youth with Disabilities is conducting a secondary analysis of the multi-site Bridges database (2005 to 2009 including about 5,000 students) to identify individual and environmental factors associated with greater likelihood of getting and keeping a paid job for transitioning youth. We are particularly interested in studying variables associated with employment success for at-risk populations who participate in the Bridges programs.

Some previous Bridges studies have focused on malleable factors (those amenable to intervention such as work-related behaviors, job site interventions), while the majority have focused on non-malleable factors (i.e., gender, type of disability). Most of the Bridges studies have been univariate predictive analyses with a single dependent variable (i.e., getting a job or keeping a job). In this study, we are particularly interested in analyzing sequential dependent variables (getting a job and “employment success” indicators), as well as focusing our attention at each stage on which group(s) do not benefit as clearly from the intervention. Based on gaps in our knowledge about mitigating factors in transition to employment, two research questions will guide data analysis:

1. What are the impacts of individual and school/community factors on a higher likelihood of getting a job after enrollment for youth participating in Bridges?
2. For those who secure a paid job, what are the impacts of individual characteristics and Bridges program services on “job success” for youth participating in Bridges?

Data for this secondary analysis will be collected from two sources: Bridges programs database and the Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics). The latter source describes schools and school districts including school setting and social composition of schools. Bridges programs collect information on youth enrollment, job development, job analysis and placement, job retention and advancement through various points of follow-up. Though our analysis, we will be comparing individual, school, and Bridges program service characteristics with job acquisition and job retention success so that we can identify the unique influence each characteristic has on desired outcomes.

Decades after the first IDEA law which promoted development of more effective transition services for youth with disabilities from high-school to adult life, there is evidence that significantly more youth are benefitting from these services (Wagner et

al., 2005). However, there also is a clear and growing disparity between minority youth with disabilities and their non-minority peers on a number of post high-school outcomes, such as employment, and enrollment in post-secondary academic/career preparation programs (Wagner et al., 2005). Although there are multiple and complex reasons contributing to these disparate outcomes (Trainor et al., 2009), in this study we will explore how

school-based structural factors (size, location, SES, social composition) together with student demographic and behavioral factors contribute to these disparities. As a result, we hope to identify effective interventions and programmatic recommendations relevant to the capacity of school systems and transition programs to improve transition services for at-risk youth.

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