



Case Studies

King County School-to-Work Project: Interagency Collaboration to Increase Employment Outcomes for Transition-Age Youth with Developmental Disabilities

Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

Abstract

The School-to-Work (STW) project in King County, Washington assists students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in obtaining employment after leaving high school. STW is a collaborative effort between 17 school districts in King County, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), 15 employment service providers, the King County Work Training program, and the King County Developmental Disabilities Division (KCDDD). DVR and KCDDD have taken a lead role in this project in funding and coordinating youth employment service delivery. The project streamlines transition services provided by DVR, KCDDD, and employment vendors to improve employment outcomes for students.

Background

In 2004, the state of Washington passed the Working Age Adult Policy, which designated employment services, particularly those focused on community-based employment, as the primary mode of state-funded service delivery for working-age adults (ages 21–62).¹ The Working Age Adult Policy shifted focus to community employment, which limited the DDD agency from offering facility-based employment services. This policy, along with the desire of DDD-agency staff to improve outcomes for youth with IDD leaving high school, provided the impetus and direction for the School-to-Work (STW) project.

Key informants reported that prior to this policy change, DVR, KCDDD, employment vendors, and the school districts did not communicate or collaborate often. While working relationships existed between some of these parties (e.g., DVR worked with KCDDD, DVR had transition counselors working with the schools, and KCDDD worked with school districts), collaborative efforts did not occur on a consistent basis. This created confusion, duplication, and fragmentation in the services provided to students and families.

¹ Hall, A.C. (2007). Washington State's working age adult policy. Retrieved from http://www.communityinclusion.org/article.php?article__id=222

This case study is an excerpt of a larger report, entitled "Case Studies of Emerging/Innovative Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Practices in Improving Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Intellectual/Development Disabilities" from the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Vocational Rehabilitation at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston. The full report can be found at vr-rrtc.org. Its suggested citation is:

Burns, R., Haines, K., Porter, E., Boeltzig, H. & Foley, S. (2013). Case Studies of Emerging/Innovative Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Practices in Improving Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities. University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

Key informants reported that families of students with IDD expressed concern over a service gap between the schools and the adult disability and employment service system, and DVR and KCDDD parties shared a concern over the lack of funding for long-term supports at the state level.² It was reported that school staff did not have the information and support to adequately prepare students for jobs. Within schools, no clear guidelines existed outlining when DVR counselors could begin to provide services to students. This resulted in many students leaving school without employment and experiencing a service gap. Typically, DVR would begin working with students in the last two months of their high-school career. DVR and KCDDD changed the way in which contracts and administrative arrangements operated and developed new funding arrangements for employment service provision through STW. KCDDD recognized the need to better integrate services across agencies and to begin employment service delivery earlier, which led to the development of STW.

Purpose and Goals of the Practice

The purpose is to improve employment outcomes for students with IDD leaving high school in King County, Washington.

² Tegenfeldt, K. (2010). King County developmental disability services division school to work project evaluation. Copy obtained from key informant. Report prepared by KCDDD.

Specific goals include:

- Assist students eligible for KCDDD in obtaining a paid job by graduation each year;
- Increase the capacity of the high schools to prepare students for employment;
- Increase collaboration between the school districts, KCDDD, and DVR;
- Increase collaboration between the schools and adult employment-service providers; and
- Work with parents to increase awareness of employment services as well as the value and possibility of employment for their children with IDD.³

Implementation

Administrative and funding arrangements

KCDDD approached DVR to discuss the implications of the Working Age Adult Policy and the need to increase the consistency of access to employment support services for all young adults with IDD, including those with the highest support needs. It was important that all students have access to services earlier. KCDDD negotiated a contract with DVR in which KCDDD serves as the DVR vendor responsible for coordinating services for STW students. The contract facilitates an infrastructure for a seamless transition between high school and work and it ensures that students receive the necessary services for successful employment. STW was initially developed around an outcome-based funding structure. KCDDD earmarked funds received from a millage assessment on property taxes within the county to invest in the county adult employment service agencies. KCDDD pays the employment service agencies for services provided to the students with the local dollars earmarked for this project. DVR reimburses KCDDD if a student successfully finds employment.

Two models were developed over the first two years, both of which are still used today. The first model requires each STW student to select a vendor to work with during his/her last year of school. A district that has five STW students might have five different vendors. Vendors may be working with students from different districts. Several districts felt that the program and outcomes would be streamlined if one designated employment consultant worked full time with a transition program in a single district. This led to the development of a second model, now known as School Partnership (formally known as the embedded-vendor model).

KCDDD works with school districts to issue a Request for a Qualified Provider to vendors. In the School Partnership Model, DVR, district staff and parents participate in a panel facilitated by KCDDD to interview and select agencies to provide services to STW students in a single district's transition program. The panel uses a rating scale to narrow down potential vendors and then interviews the top candidates to determine the best fit. Panel members seek vendors that have previous experience with the IDD population, a positive reputation in the community, effective communication skills with families, and the ability operate independently. The selection process is helpful for many families who do not have experience in seeking out vendors. DVR initiates contact with the vendors and coordinates meetings between job vendors and school districts with the assistance of KCDDD staff.

The School Partnership model houses the vendor at the school to streamline service delivery and increase student access to services. The process allows KCDDD to streamline service coordination across DVR, school districts, and service providers. The school pays approximately one third of the cost of employment services and KCDDD pays the remaining balance using dollars from the local property tax millage. This method of braided funding is unique within the state and ensures that students receive employment services while still in high school.

In 2009, the contract between DVR and King County was approximately 1.2 million dollars and the county earmarked approximately \$300,000 to pay for up-front costs of services. The contract was renewed in 2011 at 1.7 million dollars to support 200 students to get jobs through October 2013. King County earmarked approximately \$400,000 for the up-front costs. The project has been gaining support through private funding. The Hong Kong association of Washington has chosen their benefactor as the Washington Initiative for Supported Employment and plans to use funding to support STW.

A new contract between KCDDD and DVR was negotiated and went into effect July 1, 2011. It stipulated that the outcome payment would be available upon job stabilization, rather than 90 days post job stabilization. KCDDD changed the School Partnership model's vendor contract to include the outcome payment as administered under the first model. Base costs for staff under both models continued to be supported using funds earmarked from the local property

³ Ibid.

tax millage. Now, both models provide outcome payments. A key informant elaborated, “I think being able to offer that outcome payment [within the School Partnership model] probably was programmatically a good decision. It helped support the commitment of the agency.”

Training provided to school and employment service staff

Employment vendors informed KCDDD that community-based work sites established by schools were problematic for integrating students into the community through work. The jobs offered through the work sites were not structured to reflect what a student would typically encounter in the workforce. Staff were not prepared to support students to be as independent as possible and, at times, were over-supporting students and performing job tasks for them. KCDDD and DVR staff worked with technical assistance and training agencies to offer multiple trainings for school staff and employment vendors each year. Resources are invested in training school staff by DVR and KCDDD on community employment, expectations of staff, and enhancing levels of independence in students. Two topics are covered in teacher-training workshops funded by KCDDD: job coaching/natural supports and best practices in community employment.⁴ Employment vendor staff learn more about how schools operate, and how to work with others to take advantage of preexisting resources to prepare students for employment. DVR staff receive peer-to-peer training with other DVR staff about topics related to the eligibility of students and the application process.

Eligibility criteria

A student must be a client of Washington DDD, be a King County resident, be enrolled in school, express a desire to work, and be eligible for DVR services. The vast majority of students are in their last year of eligibility for school. Students are encouraged to apply for Social Security benefits though not required. Key informants stated that beneficiary status is important because of funding for long-term supports. DVR, KCDDD, and employment services staff communicate the importance of long-term support funding and encourage students and their families to use Social Security work incentives for funding long-term job supports. DVR counselors meet with a student before he or she is an official DVR client to assess whether or not participation in STW would be beneficial for the student. A DVR counselor

highlights the need for students and families to understand that participation in STW is “a commitment and investment” that requires effort from all parties.

Recruitment process and student involvement

DVR has delegated KCDDD to engage in student recruitment activities. KCDDD works with school districts to designate responsibility for identifying students to participate in STW. School districts agree to work with the students, parents, and employment services agencies to engage the students in employment-focused activities during their final year of high school. KCDDD uses several outreach activities to promote STW and to recruit students including attending parent nights at schools and going to monthly potluck dinners with parents of students in each school district. In addition to direct referrals from schools, STW’s primary source of recruitment is through yearly Transition Resource Fairs, which provide students and parents with information on a variety of transition services in Washington. KCDDD uses a statewide database to invite all school-age clients of the Washington State Division of Developmental Disabilities (WADDD) who reside in King County and are 14 years of age and older to attend the resource fairs with their families.

Transition Resource Fairs, sponsored by KCDDD, occur in south, north and east King County. This ensures geographic accessibility. DVR staff attend and provide information on their role, how long they might work with the students, and long-term funding. They also accept applications for VR services. Students tend to apply for DVR services during their second year (typically age 19 or 20), and work with DVR to gain access to STW, DVR and DDD services.

KCDDD staff provide information on STW at an orientation session that includes information about entering the program, selecting an employment services vendor, participating in planning meetings, and expectations for using public transportation and promoting independence. KCDDD staff discuss the benefits of employment and address concerns. Vendor staff attend these fairs and participate in the breakout sessions. They explain the types of services they offer and provide information on long-term supports. Students and parents attend sessions led by other disability professionals, parents, and advocates with disabilities about how to prepare for work and how to become more active in advocacy, guardianship, and adult-service systems and issues. The STW program coordinator visits King County school districts that might be interested in participating in the program and

⁴ Ibid.

former STW participants share their program experiences with interested students.

Service delivery and student participation

Once a student has applied and accepted, he or she is responsible for submitting an application for DVR services. This typically occurs between January and April before the student's last year of school. STW staff work with the student and his or her family to select an employment vendor where the vendor is not embedded in the student's school. DVR counselors help initiate contact with the employment vendors and coordinate meetings between the student and family, school staff, DVR staff, and vendors. Since the 2011 contract, two DVR counselors have been appointed as points of contact coordinators. KCDDD staff remain involved with the DVR case, particularly if there is a question of a student's ability to benefit from STW participation. Open communication between all parties is key to ensure that the student receives all the necessary services for STW participation.

Within two months of finding an employment vendor, the student, his or her parents, school staff, the employment vendor, the DVR counselor, and the DDD case manager meet for a team meeting. The goal is to develop an individualized plan for assessing the student's skills and planning their work goals over the next three months, to outline the roles of each team member, and to establish a communication strategy for members of the team.⁵ Families play an important role in supporting the student through this process.

Services for students are individualized. Some students may enter the program having had a variety of work experiences, with a clear sense of a work goal. They may be good candidates for supported-employment positions that require minimal restructuring. Other students may have limited or no work experience, and/or complex support needs. These students may require a customized approach to supported employment, including discovery, the development of a personal profile identifying specific tasks and environmental supports in an ideal job, and the creation of unique job proposals that may involve job restructuring or job creation. Following the team-planning meeting, students engage in the individual work plan activities for three to four months and then meet again for a team review meeting. This meeting is an opportunity to reflect on the student's past

months, redefine goals, and get input from the team on job development. The team meeting typically occurs by the end of February of the student's last year of school.

Services provided to students (by school-district staff and employment vendors) are dependent on the district in which the student is enrolled. These may include person-centered planning, ongoing community-based work experiences or individualized internships, short-term work experiences and job development, job placement, training, and retention services that may require both natural support and ongoing agency support at varying levels of intensity. Other community skill-building activities include pedestrian safety, using public transportation, shopping, eating out, joining community centers or athletic clubs, recreation, and learning about personal finance.⁶

Feedback gathered

In 2007, KCDDD held focus groups with special-education administrators, directors of employment service providers, DVR, and other project partners. The goal of these early feedback sessions was to determine ways to formalize the relationship between all project partners, to more clearly outline the financial commitments of the schools, and to establish strategies to improve the quality of collaboration across all project partners. During the first two years of the project, DVR transition counselors met quarterly with a KCDDD liaison to discuss STW progress. These meetings were a formal mechanism between DVR and KCDDD to discuss updates and to work through challenges. The newly negotiated contract between DVR and KCDDD stipulates that coordination meetings should occur at least twice a year. Coordination meetings primarily serve to keep partners in informed on STW.

A first "All Partners" meeting was held in August 2011. The meeting agenda primarily focused on the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community's formal evaluation. Partners discussed how the findings might impact future plans. A follow-up all-partners meeting was then held in January 2012. The information obtained from these meetings will be used to continue to evolve the program and serve more students, including those with more significant disabilities, and to improve employment outcomes.

⁵ School-To-Work project orientation video. Retrieved from <http://www.kingcounty.gov/operations/DCHS/S2W%20Video.aspx>

⁶ Tegenfeldt, K. (2010). King County developmental disability services division school to work project evaluation. Copy obtained from key informant.

Project Outcomes

Partnerships between KCDDD, DVR, employment vendors, and school districts were strengthened and roles were clarified. STW was found to improve employment outcomes of participants through KCDDD's evaluation. Trainings for teachers increased their ability to work with students to find a job. Finally, evaluations of the project revealed a shift in perceptions of students with IDD about work. The program had an initial goal of assisting 50 students eligible for KCDDD services in obtaining a job by graduation. The completion of this initial goal has provided the impetus for STW to serve as many students as possible.

Interviews revealed that STW has been able to foster collaborative and communicative relationships between the various agencies and participants involved with the program. A DVR counselor has seen tremendous improvement between DVR's relationship with schools. This informant recalls sparse buy-in from schools prior to STW. STW has led to a working relationship between schools and DVR. Nearly all of the informants emphasized the importance of open communication between all parties involved and its impact on providing effective services for students. One key informant commented, "Open communication is absolutely the thing that needs to happen. And it has to happen by all parties, always, all the time. And if that happens, if there is open and consistent communication among people, things work really well."

A KCDDD evaluation report in 2010 stated that STW had a significant impact on employment rates of students six months after leaving school. In the three years prior, employment rates six months after leaving school ranged from 7% to 14%. During the first three years of STW, employment rates of students enrolled in the project increased to 53.5% in 2006, 67.6% in 2007, and 76.4% in 2008. During those years, employment rates for students who were not enrolled in STW resembled outcomes for students prior to the project (2006: 71%, 2007: 9.0%, 2008: 12.5%).

In 2007, 67.6% (50 of 74) of STW students participating were working within six months of leaving school. In 2008, 76.4% (55 of 72) of STW students were working. These findings indicate that STW's first goal of assisting 50 students to obtain a job each year was achieved. However, wages and hours for students who participated in STW were similar to those of non-participants, with most working fewer

than 20 hours per week and earning \$750 a month or less.⁷ Key informants expressed their desire to increase the working hours for students and improve the quality of jobs.

KCDDD's evaluation revealed the benefits of making an early connection between students and employment service vendors. Of all STW participants (N=221) who participated in the program from 2005–2008, 20 students enrolled in STW did not work with an employment service agency. None were employed six months after leaving school. There are several reasons that the 20 students did not get connected with a vendor. Some did not follow through with selecting a vendor. Others developed health issues, moved out of the county, or waited too long and their desired agency could not serve them. Conversely, 72% (144 of 201) of the students who began working with an employment service agency early on were employed within six months of leaving school. Eighty percent of STW participants responding to a follow-up survey reported that they found their job through an employment vendor.⁸

KCDDD's evaluation included a student survey and a primary contacts survey on their experiences. Of the 82 of 208 (39.4%) who responded, 88% reported some type of work experience while in school. Of these, 53% reported their experience as very good and 39% reported that there were "good and bad" things about their experience. Eighty percent felt more confident that they could find a job after school because of work experience in school.⁹ A total of 50 primary contacts responded to the survey. Eighty-seven percent agreed that the student was better prepared to find and hold a community-based job and was more confident in his or her ability to work. About 85% agreed that community employment was more likely due to participation. Most respondents reported satisfaction with the employment vendor.¹⁰

STW changed the perception held by many staff and students that young adults with IDD are not capable of holding a community job. Participating teachers were asked to complete a survey about the program. Of the 20 responding teachers (response rate of 26%), 55% reported that their belief in the possibility of community employment for people with IDD had significantly increased, with another 15% reporting

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

a slight increase. Half of the respondents strongly agreed and 15% agreed with the statement, “Community-based employment can be an ongoing life activity for individuals with all types of developmental disabilities.” A key informant from KCDDD noted, “I’ve seen some people who I wouldn’t have expected to go to work become very successful [...] with an incredible amount of support from the team process in the beginning and the school’s buy-in.”¹¹ However, 35% of respondents strongly disagreed with this survey statement, pointing to the need for continued work in this area.¹²

In 2010, researchers from the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at Indiana University were contracted to formally evaluate the STW program. Many of their findings echoed the findings of the evaluation by KCDDD. Through focus groups and individual interviews with project partners (including parents of students in the program), evaluators found that, in general, all project partners were excited about the project, felt it improved coordination of services, and thought that the positive outcomes of the project reinforced that individuals with IDD can work. Feedback showed that DVR staff were more engaged and had better support from schools, families, employment vendors, and King County for making decisions about eligibility and planning services. Evaluators noted the three major strengths of the initiative to be the clarity of the mission, KCDDD leadership, and buy-in among all project partners.¹³

The Future of the Practice

The current STW design targets students during their last year of high school. Key informants from KCDDD expressed that, ideally, they would like to expand the program to include students at 16. This would facilitate an earlier exposure to gaining employment skills through community-based work experiences. A pilot was launched to work with a transition class earlier on. The goal was to provide students with as much work experience as possible during high school while remaining within the constraints of the participating service systems. Two small districts in rural areas of King County have enrolled in this pilot. The pilot is not only beneficial to the younger students receiving services earlier, but also to small districts that may not meet

the requirements of having at least eight students enrolled. DVR would like to expand the STW service model beyond King County to counties across the state of Washington. Kitsap County is looking into adopting the model, and has been communicating with the STW program coordinator about the project. A regional center in California has also expressed interest in the STW model.

INTERVIEWEES

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¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mank, D. (2010). King county developmental disabilities transition initiative: External evaluation report. Indiana University. Retrieved from <http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/DDD/services/employment/school-to-work.aspx>