

Issue Brief

Examining Current Challenges in Secondary Education and Transition



National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth
With Disabilities to Achieve
Successful Futures

A partnership of —

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Connecting Employers, Schools, and Youth Through Intermediaries

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Issue: Partnerships between education and business have proven to be an effective means for preparing young people with disabilities for positive postschool outcomes. Employers, however, are often inundated by requests for participation, causing confusion and ultimately hampering relationships between the two parties. Intermediaries can coordinate the connection between schools and employers.

Defining the Issue

The relationship between education and work is a matter that has taken on great importance with the advent of a global market increasingly driven by fast-paced changes in technology. There is a call for greater preparation of *all* high school youth for both work and advanced education. There is also widespread recognition that schools and industry must help the nation's youth advance both academically and occupationally, and to recognize these as compatible goals (Touson & Roberts, 1996).

If youth with disabilities are to develop the knowledge and skills that enable them to be fully enfranchised within the workforce, many of them will need equitable access to comprehensive work-based learning programs. This goal requires the full participation of youth with disabilities in high quality, work-based learning programs designed to prepare *all* youth for high-skill, high-wage positions. Through the years, we have learned that young people have improved post-school employment outcomes when they have participated in work-based learning programs. In turn, employers are provided with the skilled and able workers necessary to be competitive in the new economy.

Equitable access to work-based learning experiences for youth with disabilities depends on the willingness of employers to commit to high levels of involvement (Tilson, Luecking, & Donovan, 1994). However, employers are typically frustrated with the competing initiatives to recruit, train, and place young workers. In addition, they are often confused by the myriad of services and programs offered by the education and

workforce development systems.

Third-party brokers, also known as intermediaries, can be instrumental in helping to build constructive collaborations among employers, educators, and youth development program personnel, so that young people with disabilities are readily included in quality work-based learning. An intermediary is a staffed organization that connects schools and other youth-preparation organizations with workplaces and community resources. An intermediary can be a single organizational entity, a newly created non-profit, or a collaborative of several institutions in a community. For example, Montgomery Youth Works (MYW), located in Montgomery County, Maryland, aims to facilitate creation of meaningful jobs for youth. MYW was created through the county's Chamber Workforce Corporation (CWC) in cooperation with county public schools, business, government, and other concerned organizations. Another example is Massachusetts Youth Teenage Unemployment Reduction Network Incorporated (MYTURN). This intermediary coordinates partnerships among area employers, community-based organizations, institutions of higher education, civic leaders, parents, and program alumni to provide career and educational opportunities for youth.

What We Know

Youth development systems and transition services have been influenced in the last decade by several new pieces of legislation, including the Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (1990) and subsequent amendments (1997), the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act, and the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. While these recent legislative initiatives offer improved youth development and workforce preparation services, they add yet another layer of complication and confusion for employers in search of one-stop services for recruiting and hiring qualified workers with disabilities. Communities are looking for ways to broker and streamline relationships among the various community agencies providing employment assistance.

Intermediaries have existed for decades, and are designed to create and support effective collaborations. They identify opportunities and mechanisms for aligning and coordinating community resources, and provide ongoing consultation and accountability (Miller, 2001). Key to this task is coordinating the various community resources without creating turf battles. This requires that intermediaries finesse conversations among the partners to examine issues of common concern, and identify the opportunities and mechanisms for aligning and coordinating activities. Linking with an intermediary can ensure the quality and impact of local efforts, and promote policies to sustain effective work-based learning practices. Intermediaries can provide all youth, including youth with disabilities, access to a wider range of learning experiences and career development services within the community.

Benefits of Intermediary Organizations

Intermediaries can enhance the professional development of employers and their ability to work effectively with youth with disabilities. They provide employers with both specific information about youth with disabilities, and information about strategies that will help them address training or supervision issues. For example, an intermediary can assist employers in making sure youth entering the workplace are equipped with industry-based competencies and employer-validated skills. By consulting with employers, intermediaries can help build internal competence within a business to support and accommodate youth with disabilities.

Knowledge about issues and strategies allows employers to: (a) understand the complexities of workers and work-based learning environments, (b) avoid becoming discouraged by the failures they may encounter when working with youth with disabilities, (c) effectively confront and accommodate disability-related problems, and (d) recognize situations in which youth may not have been appropriately matched to the job (Luecking & Fabian, 2000). An intermediary can match employers to employees, thus contributing to the overall quality of the future workforce.

Intermediaries can also assist educators and schools. Educators today face great pressure to address high academic standards, teach to specific learning styles, attend to influences outside of the classroom, and engage at-risk

learners. Work-based learning experiences purposely linked with classroom learning provide an effective avenue for addressing these challenges. For instance, meaningful connections to the workplace augment both academic and career preparation, allow for more relevant learning for students at risk of dropping out, and enrich many other teaching opportunities (Goldberger, Keough, & Almedia, 2001). Intermediaries can be a mechanism by which educators connect to the world outside the classroom.

For youth with disabilities, linking to an intermediary can be a way to achieve immediate and future career goals. Intermediaries can connect youth to quality work-based learning experiences and educate workplace supervisors, mentors, and coworkers about the accommodation and integration of workers with disabilities in their companies. Specific assistance that intermediaries can provide to stakeholder groups is highlighted in **Table 1**.

In Summary

Gaining the interest and commitment of employers to engage in local workforce development systems can prove challenging, but these challenges can be eased by intermediaries. The current global marketplace creates a sense of urgency on the part of employers to meet the demand for qualified workers and to diversify their workforce. This creates a timely opportunity for schools and workforce development entities to introduce employers to the work potential of youth with disabilities. Intermediaries can make this introduction convenient, effective, and sustainable.

Table 1: Functions of Intermediaries

Intermediaries can help *employers*:

- identify qualified pools of young workers;
- recruit and screen potential applicants based on employer specifications;
- design work-based learning experiences that meet the needs of youth and employers;
- provide effective workplace accommodations and support services;
- network with other employers about workforce development trends, concerns, and solutions;
- communicate industry skill needs to education and training providers; and
- improve the overall quality of connections to schools and community organizations.

Intermediaries can help *educators*:

- connect classroom learning with the workplace;
- create and coordinate work-based learning placements;
- create and deliver job-readiness activities;
- connect to WIA Youth Councils and youth development services;
- provide mentoring and career-readiness training for youth; and
- provide an ongoing venue for stakeholders to dialogue and make decisions about youth education and services.

Intermediaries can help *youth with disabilities*:

- develop realistic and positive career plans;
- connect work-based learning experiences to classroom learning;
- arrange for course or academic credit when possible;
- receive effective workplace accommodations and supports;
- connect with postsecondary options, adult mentors, and community-based supports; and
- find entry-level positions after high school.

Intermediaries can help *communities*:

- prepare *all* youth for the workplace;
- streamline youth service options and requirements;
- measure the impact of local policies and practices on student learning and the workforce;
- promote quality work-based learning activities to enhance employer buy-in;
- conduct outreach to other community institutions and partners; and
- sustain dialogue between major players.

References

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Resources

School-to-Work Intermediary Project
www.intermediarynetwork.org

**The Intermediary Guidebook: Making and Managing
Community Connections for Youth**

Print copies available from: Jobs for the Future, Publications Department
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