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CENTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

## **Employment and People with Disabilities: A Social Ill to Change, Not Manage**

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During the last twenty-five years there has been a cataclysmic shift in the employment world of Americans. The fundamental shift and loss of the manufacturing base in America impacted not only the middle working class but also those individuals with disabilities who would have had a more secure start into the workforce in the manufacturing sector. The loss of entry level jobs that did not require college but might require mechanical, vocational, or skills in the trades were essentially wiped out. The Free Trade Agreements (which spanned several administrations both Republican and Democratic) essentially moved entire industries, their support industries and suppliers either overseas or over the border. Left behind were jobs that were retail based or jobs that were at the end of the manufacturing process. Students in Special Education, with high or low incidence conditions, were all affected by these events. Those students and adults who might have had access to the workforce through school, families, friends or major industries within their home communities find those opportunities now gone. Good paying jobs with security have left with little chance of returning. The education system did not fully understand this change fully during the last twenty years as they continued to push traditional college enrollment as a means to job attainment despite the increasing unemployment for classified students. The *employment* rate for workers with disabilities of all kinds still hovers (in NY) around 35%, unlike non-disabled workers who remain at or around 84% (Cornell University 2007 Disability Status Report).

Concurrent to this cataclysmic event, in the field of developmental disabilities another event occurred that would impact the same people it was supposed to serve. Medicaid funded services, now waived from their regulatory restrictions, were promulgated as being the start of a new world for individuals with the most severe disabilities. Supported employment was advertised as the means to socially correct the inadequacies of congregate and segregated services for the most significantly impaired. A large share of employment funding went to the most significantly impaired to correct years of neglect. However the greatest, and not coincidentally most, amount of funding went toward habilitation services such as Service Coordination, Day Habilitation and Residential Habilitation. This shift moved the large human service agencies from a professed employment outcome as their goal for their constituents toward a more lucrative and high margin service. The profit margin of revenue to staffing (salaries were and remain very low, attracting mostly semi-skilled workers) was so large that there was an inevitable shift away from actual employment support to group habilitation

services. This shift enabled most of the agencies to become mega-agencies with disproportionate amount of revenue toward habilitation and away from employment as an outcome. This growth did little to increase the number of individuals employed but certainly impacted agencies' financial and organizational size. In addition, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) funds are significantly lower than those of Developmental Disabilities despite the differential social impact on communities and the economy. This system too, was driven to provide the most amount of money to the most severely disabled while its funds and programs for individuals with less severe disabilities were limited with big gaps. Schools will send students to the State VR systems without a complete understanding of the services and probability of success. State VR and their supported employment arm provide a comprehensive service for the severely disabled but their job placement services have huge gaps for the less impaired. Essentially, there remains a need for a service that provides individuals with mild disabilities some level of support, as the Vocational Rehabilitation models at this time do not include intermittent long-term services.

Individuals with Learning Disabilities, Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism, were being pushed out of, or never seeing, decent paying jobs that might have been available if not for the major shift away from manufacturing and their support industries to a service economy. They were not suited to the mega-agencies as the programs and staffing skills don't often match their unique capabilities and level of cognition. However left without adequate services they often took the Medicaid route in order to have some safety net. In school they were often being pushed into college when they were either not adequately prepared or had no career endgame in mind if they graduated. In addition to this confluence of conflicting issues, transition services were becoming more important to head off this steamroller of events. For students with both high and low significance of disability an emphasis on the transition process from school is now one of the key solutions.

Despite the vortex of issues that surround this social ill there are some solutions. First should be an awareness of what is transpiring in the workplace and an end to the reluctance to look at this disability and employment issue clearly. Employment is the ultimate outcome education is designed to provide and most individuals want and need employment for personal dignity and livelihood. Transition services, when properly and effectively implemented, are more effective in addressing some of these issues. Schools can provide a clear view of the workforce by analyzing, promulgating and tracking employment trends and training designed to coincide with those trends. Encouraging and enabling work experiences for special education students during high school is a critical component, not only for college bound students, but for students considering technical school or employment upon graduation as well. Families often believe that exclusive focus on academics is the prescription to success when, in fact, students with disabilities who have worked during high school demonstrate a higher rate of staying in college and not dropping out.

Experiencing work is critical for students with disabilities since their greatest challenges include overcoming the barriers of their disability not just in school but in their ultimate goal of being in the workforce. Starting work or internships in high school enables them to have a better idea of the impact of their disability in real work situations with a cadre of highly skilled professionals, i.e. special education teachers, psychologists, social workers, transition coordinators etc., to assist in the development of strategies to overcome their disability.

Preparing students for the non-academic issues that their disability impacts is crucial as well. Social skills, executive functioning skills, self-advocacy and self-determination are all critical in the college, technical school and work arenas. Being able to fully understand their disability, its etiology, impact, barriers and strategies needs to be taught and inculcated as fully as multiplication tables would be in math.

Technical schools and colleges need closer scrutiny as a potential post-secondary means to career outcome since most of them have a placement requirement as part of their mandate.

Why these options are not given the fullest attention by guidance counselors is usually not because of their effectiveness or reliability, but due to their specialty status. They are off the beaten track of the usual "college" pathway and therefore not given the same level of attention as the typical four-year college, or even two year community college.

Realistic and effective transition programming by schools for students with disabilities, no matter the level of disability, may be the best way to affect the social ill of under- or unemployment for people with disabilities. The current economic crisis tells us that state funding through adult service providers alone cannot meet, nor are they capable of meeting, that need. Schools can and should address this issue since they have the resources, the legal mandate and the skilled professionals needed to implement the necessary services in a committed way. Through transition in schools we can change this social ill, not manage it.