

State Agency Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Collaboration

Delaware's Early Start to Supported Employment Pilot Project

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Background

The Early Start to Supported Employment (ESSE) pilot started in 2005 with the goal of providing a more seamless transition for students who would benefit from supported employment services when leaving school and entering the adult workforce. An interagency project team was established to guide the pilot work and ensure all required parties knew their role and shared information and equal responsibility within the project.

Implementation

The main catalyst for ESSE was the difficulty that students and families were having in their transitions from school to work. After years of involvement solely within the public education system, individuals and families grew accustomed to that system's practices. Coupled with a lack of familiarity with the adult services system, this created anxiety when setting realistic expectations for post-school experiences. Additionally, teachers and other education system staff were not familiar with all of the transition knowledge and resources their colleagues in adult employment systems had to offer, often unintentionally exacerbating the problem.

The ESSE project management team became a key driver for the pilot's success, committing to a multi-year project to learn how to more effectively support successful employment outcomes for students requiring long-term adult services. The team members included individuals representing the Delaware Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), the Delaware Division of Developmental Disabilities Services (DDDS), the Delaware Department of Education (DOE), higher education, and participating local school districts, and a parent of a young adult involved in the pilot. The team dynamic has been critical, illustrating how

working together, communicating about problems and potential solutions, and tracking progress has lead to improved outcomes for youth moving from school to the adult world. Nine project management meetings were held for planning and implementation during the first two years of the pilot.

The agencies pledged to creatively use existing funds to achieve their goals. As the transition-aged young adults pass predefined checkpoints (milestones) on the way to their employment goals, DVR uses allocated transition funds. D DDS provides follow-along funds to ensure individuals and families receive support, information, and counseling as needed and to maintain continuous contact through the various stages of the individual's life. DOE contributes funds on a case-by-case basis with the emphasis on primary funding from the other two systems.

Impact

The impact of ESSE has been acknowledged on many levels. First, a range of providers have successfully collaborated within existing rules and resources, committing to involve a wide range of entities, including the adult service providers. This team met regularly to identify successes, challenges and solutions. The need for accountability and input from everyone is supported and expected as a condition of participation and has led to the pilot's evolving success.

Support staff, such as teachers, came to benefit from this team-based approach, sharing the transition workload with their partners who had transition services expertise.

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TransCen, a Rockville, Maryland-based organization contracting with DOE and focusing on the school-to-adult-life transition of youth receiving special education, conducted evaluations during the first two years of the ESSE pilot. The reports are available online (see DOE link below) and outline how each system team member responded to evaluation questions with feedback for continuous improvement. TranCen's evaluation activities focused on student outcomes, examining the extent to which post-school supports were in place before students leave the public education system. Since the inception of ESSE, roughly 20 students are employed in community settings with adult supports in place, and several of those hires occurred prior to graduation. Roughly, an additional 40 are currently enrolled in the project. Finally, 16 high school programs have recommended students to participate in ESSE.

At both state and local levels, the system partners have learned how to promote the highest level of success possible for each individual. The state agencies gain a better understanding of what each system partner can do to minimize service redundancies and maximize available resources. At a local level, the schools spend time learning what individuals would like to do post-graduation, an essential early step leading to appropriately planning and working with individuals and families to reach those goals. Local transition specialists are better informed and can craft clearer goals with the students. Most importantly, young adults and their families experience less anxiety and a smoother transition into employment and adult supports.

Suggestions for Replication

- » Establish clear interagency commitment to address the transition process, and formalize performance expectations from each agency
- » Be clear and explicit when defining the process
- » Ensure resources (staff, funds, schedules) are assigned specific roles
- » Look for expertise so staff in all areas of supports can best assist students and families

Resources

Many useful resources are available on the DOE website:

www.doe.k12.de.us/programs/specialed/transition

- » General transition and IEP-related items
- » Parent Handbook
- » ESSE Timeline and Benchmarks (for system partners; a version for families can be found in the Parent Handbook). This timeline is an effective tool to guide services during the last 1.5 years of school and into post-school employment.
- » Two reports from TransCen, Inc., evaluating Year 1 and Year 2 of the ESSE pilot.

**For more information on this practice
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