

Improving Transition Outcomes

An Innovative State Alignment Grant for Improving Transition Outcomes
for Youth with Disabilities Through the Use of Intermediaries

Youth Connections: E-Mentoring and Vocational Exploration for Students with Disabilities

Vision

Students with disabilities will leave high school with work-ready skills and an employment plan. Local high schools will partner with businesses to provide job shadows, work experiences, and E-Mentoring. The impact of these activities on transition outcomes and the local workforce will validate and sustain this partnership.

Team

- Youth with disabilities, 16-20 years of age
- Parents of children with disabilities
- Council Bluffs Chamber of Commerce
- Council Bluffs Community School District
- Ministerial Association
- Iowa School for the Deaf
- Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- Iowa Western Community College
- Iowa Workforce Development
- League of Human Dignity (Center for Independent Living)
- Loess Hills Area Education Agency
- Pottawattamie County Community Services

Demographics

Pottawattamie County has a population of 87,704 with 58,268 residing in the City of Council Bluffs. Youth Connections focused on youth enrolled in Council Bluffs high schools with graduation rates below the state average of 90.78 percent. Graduation rates ranged from the Lewis Central high of 87.40 to the Kaneshville Alternative low of 23.7.

Strengths

- History of collaborating to provide transition services for youth with disabilities
- Transition Advisory Committee in existence for 16 years
- Transition services with a workforce emphasis
- Lack of turf issues – willingness to partner
- Supportive mayor and city government
- Supportive county government
- Disability Navigator housed in the local One Stop Center
- Benefits Planners in the area

Governance Group

Iowa Department
for the Blind

Iowa Department
of Education

Iowa Department
of Human Services

Iowa Division
of Persons with
Disabilities

Iowa Vocational
Rehabilitation
Services

Iowa Governor's
Developmental
Disabilities Council

Iowa Workforce
Development

Challenge

Networks of friends, family members, neighbors, churches, clubs and other organizations often provide youth with the direct and indirect support to successfully move from high school to adult life. Unfortunately, not all young people with disabilities have well-developed social networks to rely on as they make the transition. Students with disabilities have higher drop out rates, lower post secondary education enrollment, and lower employment rates than students without disabilities.

Not all young people with disabilities have well-developed social networks to rely on as they make the transition

We believe that access to or lack of a network significantly impacts the transition from high school to the adult world, especially for youth with disabilities. As a team we sought a way to connect high school students with others in the community who could help them build a support network by linking them to resources, continuing education, and work opportunities.

Solution

Our preferred approach for increasing networks for youth was to match students with mentors from local businesses. However, we were concerned with the difficulties of establishing a face-to-face mentoring program. Business people are busy with multiple demands; teens are also busy with school activities and vulnerable to peer pressure that might discourage participation in a mentoring program.

After researching countless ways that community members across Iowa worked to improve transition outcomes for youth, we found the solution in e-mentoring. E-mentoring can be a workforce tool. Businesses, who allow employees to mentor during work hours, are connected with potential workers. Youth, who need to know more about the working world, have the advantage of connecting with and learning from individuals in the local workforce. We wanted youth to be aware of employment opportunities in the community and what it takes to secure and maintain a job.

E-mentoring appeals to youth and adults

Preparation

Framework: We were fortunate to have an established, cohesive team that had previously worked together to improve the transition from school to work for youth with disabilities. The Transition Advisory Committee has been in existence for many years and served as a leading force to help schools implement School to Work programs during the 1990s. The group is currently active with drop out prevention efforts and is working to expand transportation options for those with disabilities.

Note from Improving Transition Outcomes:

If your community does not have an established team, we strongly suggest that you refer to the Transition Partners Replication Template. A solid foundation, where team members trust one another and openly collaborate, is essential to successfully implementing and sustaining an intervention such as e-mentoring.

Our team chose to utilize Iowa Mentoring Partnership (IMP), a non-profit organization serving all communities and mentoring programs in the state. IMP provides information, training materials, and certification for mentoring programs in Iowa and their website serves as a neutral site for distribution of e-mail between mentors and mentees. E-mail messages between mentors and youth are filtered and forwarded to the recipient, without showing the actual e-mail address of either party. Additionally, designated e-mentoring coordinators have the authority to review the e-mail messages. Utilizing the IMP provided a measure of credibility and security that was reassuring to administrators, teachers, and parents.

Coordination: We hired a coordinator to act as liaison between the schools and businesses. This person was responsible for recruiting businesses, training mentors, and arranging vocational exploration activities. At the end of grant funding, advisory committee partners Council Bluffs School District, Area Education Agency, and Iowa School for the Deaf shared responsibility for leading the Youth Connections consortium. Rather than hire a coordinator, amongst themselves they absorbed the coordination duties by assigning specific pieces to specific staff members.

Schools: Each participating high school was encouraged to structure Youth Connections' activities in a way that made sense for them and best used their resources. In some schools the program was attached to a career education class, in others it became a part of the English class activities. The teacher of these classes became the main contact person for their school.

Businesses: Businesses were recruited through the Chamber of Commerce, service organizations and through recommendations of advisory committee members. The businesses were asked to allow employees to e-mail students at least once per week, during the business day. Some companies volunteered to host job shadows and tours for groups of students. Grant funds were also used to sponsor a small number of paid work experience activities for students who had never worked and were having trouble finding jobs unassisted. Because work experience is a temporary training activity, there is minimal risk for both the business and the student. Although all partners found considerable value in the work experience component, it was also the most difficult element to sustain due to the expense and staff time required.

Barriers

Our team encountered and addressed several barriers. Some were long standing issues that we continue to address; others came to our attention as we worked on implementing and sustaining e-mentoring.

Transportation: Because several ingredients of the prototype involved taking students to business locations, it was necessary to arrange for transportation on a regular basis. Initially the coordinator did the majority of this but when grant funding ended, the schools lacked resources to supply this service. One school employee applied for and received a small community grant that allowed the transit service to continue.

Parent Involvement: Obtaining meaningful, on-going participation from parents proved difficult. The few parents who provided input during the start-up phase of the prototype did not remain involved. Most parents were willing to sign permission forms for their children to take part in mentoring and the career exploration trips but did not demonstrate active interest beyond that. Although that was frustrating for team members, one teacher saw it as a positive sign that parents are allowing their 11th and 12th grade students to operate more independently.

Paid Internships: The first year students who had difficulty finding jobs on their own greatly benefited from internships supported through grant funds. Although effective, this expensive activity is difficult to sustain. The Workforce Investment Act program can provide this for students but funds are limited.

Attendance: Many of the students involved in the prototype do not have good school attendance patterns. This presented problems when students missed job shadows, speakers or company tours because they were not in school. Although teachers and e-mentors stressed the importance of attendance both at school and at work, absenteeism was a chronic problem for some students.

Implementation

After securing background clearance, mentors from local businesses were matched with students with disabilities from six high schools. Students and mentors filled out information forms so that the pairs could be matched by gender and shared interests. All mentors received training from the Youth Connections Coordinator to help them understand the purpose of the program, the importance of confidentiality and other standard protocol.

Weekly e-mail messages reinforced career education class concepts. Mentors shared information about hiring practices, necessary education and skills, attendance policies, job promotion procedures and other employment related topics. Businesses allowed their employees to participate in e-mentoring on work time. The Youth Connections Coordinator provided on-going support to mentors during the school year. Mentors used the coordinator as a resource when they encountered situations with students that they weren't sure how to handle. One student's family lost their home to a fire and the mentor contacted the coordinator; together they found sources of assistance for the family.

Teachers encouraged their students to e-mail their mentors during class, use appropriate business language, and proofread their messages. In addition to e-mentoring, Youth Connections students were given opportunities to go on company tours and to job-shadow workers.

Results

When asked about Youth Connections at the end of the school year, students gave very positive feedback. The things they liked best included being able to communicate with an adult via e-mail, getting advice about their part time jobs or work search efforts, and post-secondary education plans. They also gave high marks to the business tours and job shadows.

Surveys conducted with project mentors show that nearly all felt e-mentoring was a rewarding and worthwhile experience. The majority of those who were a mentor the first year volunteered to return the following school year. One mentor commented, "Even though I'm busy with my job and family, I feel it's important to find a way to help the young people of our community. E-mentoring allows me to do that in a way that fits my schedule and lets me make a difference in the life of a young person."

"Even though I'm busy with my job and family...e-mentoring fits my schedule and lets me make a difference in the life of a young person."

The e-mentoring project was designed to improve the social networking skills of youth with disabilities so they could become their own resource mappers. As evidence of their success, we monitored the percentage of participating youth who graduated, went on for post-secondary education and who were employed. Among the students who participated for a minimum of 1 year in the e-mentoring program, 50% are still enrolled, 45.5% have graduated, and only 4.5% dropped out. This leaves a high school completion rate for students participating in this project of 91%. Among graduates in this project, 55% enrolled in post-secondary education. Of the total students in the program 32% are employed full time and 52% are employed part time (most of these are still in high school).

Teachers were equally enthusiastic. They appreciated mentors reinforcing that the practical soft skills taught in the classroom are valuable in the workplace. Several teachers noted that students improved their written communication and computer skills by corresponding with their mentors on a regular basis. One school administrator believes strongly that e-mentoring has been an effective drop-out prevention tool. He wants to double the number of students served next year and envisions including middle school and upper elementary students in the future.

Bonus

Although Council Bluffs e-mentors focused their messages on career related matters, as the mentor-mentee relationships developed, they became a rich source of encouragement and support for the students. One student, who enrolled in the community college after high school, lives independently and continues to communicate regularly with her mentor. She is working part time, a job secured with assistance from her mentor.

Business people learned important lessons as well. The program director at a child care center was pleasantly surprised after she agreed to accept a very shy student for a work experience training activity. “She was not impressive during the interview; not the type of person I would normally have hired, but she’s matured into an excellent employee. She is responsible and very good with the children so I hired her after her training ended.”

Maintenance

E-mentoring is a relatively low cost, low maintenance program, but there are some personnel and materials costs involved. A coordinator is needed to find mentors, work with teachers to identify students, match the pairs and provide some program oversight. The coordinator could be a school employee, a business or Chamber of Commerce representative, someone from the One-Stop Center, or a volunteer. The amount of time needed for this position depends on the number of students involved and the scope of the project. Mentors need to receive training and be provided with on-going support when questions or concerns arise. Vocational exploration activities, such as business tours and job shadows, require coordination and transportation.

When teaching students the importance of networking, it's helpful to model that behavior by maintaining strong networks.

Lessons Learned

After operating Youth Connections for two years, the following best practices are recommended:

- Attach the program to a specific class so that a teacher can encourage students, monitor progress and be a contact for the coordinator and mentors.
- Use an existing neutral website (such as the Iowa Mentoring Partnership www.iowamentoring.org or create your own. The website offers a number of advantages such as providing a safeguard for both students and mentors by keeping each person's e-mail address hidden.
- Criminal and abuse background checks should be conducted for all potential mentors.
- Job shadows, business tours and One-Stop Center tours enhance the learning and networking experience for students and are important elements to include.
- Finding businesses and mentors is not difficult. Many businesses are eager to contribute to their communities and will encourage their employees to participate. Mentors can be recruited through the Chamber of Commerce or economic development groups, service clubs and faith-based organizations.
- Although the relationships are conducted primarily through e-mail, both students and mentors enjoy meeting each other. Face-to-face meetings are recommended when the pair is initially matched and at the end of the school year.
- Partnerships are crucial to the success of an e-mentoring program. In Council Bluffs, the advisory group originally included members from the schools, the Area Education Agency, the Chamber of Commerce, the community college, Workforce Development, parents of students with disabilities, faith-based organizations and adult service providers.
- When teaching students the importance of networking, it's helpful to model that behavior by maintaining strong networks with your community partners.

- Join forces with other groups that share similar goals. Pottawattamie County adopted America's Promise. Two of the five promises (Caring Adults and Marketable Skills) align well with our prototype goals. This alliance strengthens the efforts of both groups.

For more information:

Mary Warren, Program Director
Iowa Western Community College Workforce Development
300 W. Broadway, Suite 13
Council Bluffs, IA. 51503
mary.warren@iwd.iowa.gov

This document was developed by Youth Connections: E-Mentoring and Vocational Exploration for Students with Disabilities, a demonstration prototype established with grant funding from Improving Transition Outcomes with Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy #E-9-4-3-0093. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor.

ITO-IVRS
510 E. 12th St.
Des Moines, IA 50319
515-281-0275



This document was developed by Improving Transition Outcomes with Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy #E-9-4-3-0093. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor.