

CHAPTER 2



The Guideposts Framework

This chapter provides a framework that can help youth service professionals bridge multiple institutional boundaries to support youth development during the transition to adulthood. It also describes the underlying principle that successful adult outcomes are predicated on leveraging individual strengths and proactively minimizing difficulties in academic, social, and employment settings.

Youth Development and Positive Adult Outcomes

Youth development prepares young people to meet the challenges of adult life through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences that help them to become competent adults. In today's complex world, the transition to adulthood does not end when a student leaves school. Rather, it continues until at least the mid-20s. During this period, broad patterns of cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and physical development common for youth and young adults ideally lead to:

- the development of social competencies;

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- the building of supportive relationships;
- engagement in the community; and
- the establishment of independence.

This Guide's emphasis on employment outcomes recognizes

that the "workplace" is found within a labor market system which has one major objective—to fill vacant jobs with skilled individuals. Employers have numerous ways of screening, evaluating, and selecting new employees and commonly use interviews, testing, work trials, internships, observations, resume reviews, and references to determine which applicant is the best fit for a job. When youth and young adults enter the workforce, those with high educational achievement and relevant work experiences usually have an advantage over others.

The nature of what employers demand in the 21st century workplace is also changing. High school and college graduates not only must master basic academic skills, but also must master more advanced "applied skills" such as teamwork, critical thinking, and communication. Furthermore, according to a recent

survey of hundreds of employers conducted by the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resources Management, many new entrants to the workforce have had limited opportunities to develop these important applied skills. These business leaders reported that while basic skills are still fundamental to every employee's ability to do a job, such applied skills are even more important (2006).

Knowledge and Skills Needed for Success

Basic Knowledge and Skills

- English Language (spoken)
- Reading Comprehension
- Writing
- Mathematics
- Science
- Government and Economics
- Humanities and the Arts
- Foreign Languages
- History and Geography

Applied Skills

- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Oral Communications
- Written Communications
- Teamwork and Collaboration
- Diversity
- Information Technology Use
- Leadership
- Creativity and Innovation
- Lifelong Learning and Self-Direction
- Professionalism and Work Ethic
- Ethics and Social Responsibility

Acquiring such skills usually occurs over time and in multiple venues, including the workplace itself. The question can be asked, "What strategies are most effective in ensuring that youth with learning disabilities acquire the academic, functional, applied, and social skills they will need in the workplace?"

The Guideposts for Success

Building on 30 years of research and experience, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth), in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), created the *Guideposts for Success*, a comprehensive framework that identifies from a developmental perspective what all youth, including youth with disabilities, need to succeed during the critical transition years.

The *Guideposts* resulted from an extensive review of research, demonstration projects, and effective practices covering a wide range of programs and services – including lessons from youth development, quality education, workforce development, and the child welfare system – which identified commonalities across the disciplines, programs, and institutional settings. The review pointed out that all youth achieve better outcomes when they have access to:

- high quality standards-based education;
- information about career options and exposure to the world of work, including structured internships;
- opportunities to develop social, civic, and leadership skills;
- strong connections to caring adults;
- access to safe places to interact with their peers; and
- support services and specific accommodations to allow them to become independent adults.

The *Guideposts* framework is built on the following basic values:

- high expectations for all youth, including youth with disabilities;
- equality of opportunity for everyone, including nondiscrimination, individualization, inclusion, and integration;
- full participation through self-determination, informed choice, and participation in decision-making;
- independent living, including skills development and long-term supports and services, where necessary;
- competitive employment and economic self-sufficiency, with or without supports; and
- transition planning that is individualized, person-driven, and culturally and linguistically appropriate.

This last point cannot be overemphasized. In developing strategies and programming to meet the needs of youth with disabilities, service providers should insist on culturally responsive service systems that respect differences among individuals.

Within the overall Guideposts framework, programs and policymakers should emphasize youth with learning disabilities acquiring skills related to the following: 1) strategic learning for the workplace, 2) individual development strategies, and 3) disclosure and accommodations strategies. Additionally, the research consistently points out that particular attention must be given to the appropriateness of the diagnostic assessments used to determine the type and severity of learning disabilities due to the large numbers of misdiagnosed or undiagnosed individuals in this group.

The Guideposts are grouped into five areas.

1. School-Based Preparatory Experiences

In order to perform at optimal levels in all education settings, all youth need to participate in educational programs grounded in standards, clear performance expectations, and graduation exit options based upon meaningful, accurate, and relevant indicators of student learning and skills. These should include the following:

- academic programs that are based on clear state standards;
- career and technical education programs that are based on professional and industry standards;
- curricular and program options based on universal design of school, work, and community-based learning experiences;
- learning environments that are small and safe, including extra supports such as tutoring, as necessary;
- supports from and by highly qualified staff;
- access to an assessment system that includes multiple measures; and
- graduation standards that include options.

In addition, youth with disabilities need to do the following:

- use their individual transition plans to drive their personal instruction, and use strategies to continue the transition process post-schooling;

- have access to specific and individual learning accommodations while they are in school;
- develop knowledge of reasonable accommodations that they can request and control in educational settings, including assessment accommodations; and
- be supported by highly qualified transitional support staff that may or may not be school staff.

Because of the strong correlation between school-based preparatory experiences and positive employment outcomes, youth with learning disabilities benefit from staff and experiences that help them understand how the strategies they use to learn in classroom settings can be applied to the workplace. They benefit from access to individualized assessments for school and work, practice requesting reasonable accommodations to ease the effects of the environment on their disability, and practice incorporating instructional strategies centered on “learning how to learn” outside of the classroom.

2. Career Preparation & Work-Based Learning Experiences

Career preparation and work-based learning experiences are essential in order for youth to form and develop aspirations and to make informed choices about careers. These experiences can be provided during the school day or through after-school programs, and will require collaborations with other organizations. All youth need information on career options, including the following:

- career assessments to help identify students’ school and post-school preferences and interests;
- structured exposure to postsecondary education and other life-long learning opportunities;
- exposure to career opportunities that ultimately lead to a living wage, including information about educational requirements, entry requirements, income and benefits potential, and asset accumulation; and
- training designed to improve job-seeking skills and workplace basic skills (sometimes called “soft skills”).

Youth with learning disabilities need exposure to work-based learning and vocational activities that focus on their individual interests, skills, and aptitudes.

In order to identify and attain career goals, youth need to be exposed to a range of experiences, including the following:

- opportunities to engage in a range of work-based exploration activities such as site visits and job shadowing;
- multiple on-the-job training experiences, including community service (paid or unpaid), that are specifically linked to the content of a program of study and school credit;
- opportunities to learn and practice their work skills (so-called “soft skills”); and
- opportunities to learn first-hand about specific occupational skills related to a career pathway.

In addition, youth with disabilities need to do the following:

- understand the relationships between benefits planning and career choices;
- learn to communicate their disability-related work support and accommodation needs; and
- learn to find, formally request, and secure appropriate supports and reasonable accommodations in education, training, and employment settings.

Because experience gained from career preparation and work-based learning experiences often informs later decisions regarding employment options, youth with learning disabilities need exposure to work-based learning and vocational activities that focus on their individual interests, skills, and aptitudes. They also need a clear understanding of how their processing difficulties may impact their career options, how accommodations can minimize many barriers,

and how disclosure of their disability to others can facilitate success in employment.

3. Youth Development & Leadership

Youth development is a process that prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them gain skills and competencies. Youth leadership is part of that process. *In order to control and direct their own lives based on informed decisions, all youth need:*

- mentoring activities designed to establish strong relationships with adults in formal and informal settings;
- peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities;
- exposure to role models in a variety of contexts;
- training in skills such as self-advocacy and conflict resolution;
- exposure to personal leadership and youth development activities, including community service; and
- opportunities that allow youth to exercise leadership and build self-esteem.

In addition, youth with disabilities need:

- mentors and role models including persons with and without disabilities; and
- an understanding of disability history, culture, and disability public policy issues as well as their rights and responsibilities.

Because youth development and leadership opportunities are effective and lead to successful outcomes for youth with disabilities, youth can learn how to effectively access accommodations needed in the workplace, and access activities that promote self-determination, self-advocacy, and goal setting. This includes instruction in and opportunities to practice interpersonal skills and to develop functional work capacities. It can also be particularly useful for young people to meet and spend time with successful adults (and peers) who also have learning disabilities.

4. Connecting Activities

Young people need to be connected to programs, services, activities, and supports that help them gain access to chosen post-school options. *All youth may need one or more of the following:*

- mental and physical health services;
- transportation;
- housing;
- tutoring;
- financial planning and management;
- post-program supports thorough structured arrangements in postsecondary institutions and adult service agencies; and
- connection to other services and opportunities (e.g., recreation).

In addition, youth with disabilities may need:

- acquisition of appropriate assistive technologies;
- community orientation and mobility training (e.g., accessible transportation, bus routes, housing, health clinics);
- exposure to post-program supports such as independent living centers and other consumer-driven community-based support service agencies;
- personal assistance services, including attendants, readers, interpreters, or other such services; and
- benefits planning counseling, including information regarding the myriad of benefits available and their interrelationships, so that they may maximize those

benefits in transitioning from public assistance to self-sufficiency.

Because having access to healthcare, housing, and transportation is fundamental to being a reliable member of the workforce, young people with learning disabilities, in part due to their processing difficulties, may require additional training and support in order to understand how to obtain these services. They also need to know that their eligibility to receive certain services may terminate when they exit school or reach a specific age. Therefore, the youth may require assistance in planning to avoid gaps in services as they transition from youth service systems to adult service systems.

5. Family Involvement and Supports

Participation and involvement of parents, family members, and/or other caring adults in a youth's life promotes the social, emotional, physical, academic, and occupational growth of youth, which leads to better post-school outcomes. *All youth need parents, families, and other caring adults who have:*

- high expectations which build upon the young person's strengths, interests, and needs and foster their ability to achieve independence and self-sufficiency;
- been involved in their lives and assisting them toward adulthood;
- access to information about employment, further education, and community resources;
- taken an active role in transition planning with schools and community partners; and
- access to medical, professional, and peer support networks.

In addition, youth with disabilities need parents, families, and other caring adults who have:

- an understanding of their youth's disability and how it affects his or her education, employment and/or daily living options;
- knowledge of rights and responsibilities under various disability-related legislation;
- knowledge of and access to programs, services, supports, and accommodations available for young people with disabilities; and

Schools, community-based programs, and post-school programs must collaborate to design and align their service strategies to assist these youth.

- understanding of how individualized planning tools can assist youth in achieving transition goals and objectives.

Because youth with learning disabilities need access to educational, vocational, technological, and social supports including accommodations in order to be able to navigate effectively in some environments, they need families who are aware of and adept at accessing available resources and able to share their knowledge with their youth. At the same time, youth with learning disabilities need family members who demonstrate a great deal of understanding as the youth alternate between wanting a lot of support and wanting virtually no support.

Development Strategies for Youth with Learning Disabilities – A Focus on Skills

As noted above, workforce system partners, including schools and youth development programs, need to help youth build not only academic skills but also vocational and social competencies, supportive relationships, community engagement, and independence. No one institution has the charter or the capacity to provide all of the needed supports to help those with diagnosed or undiagnosed learning disabilities become successful. Thus, schools, community-based programs, and post-school programs must collaborate to design and align their service strategies to assist these youth.

For many youth with learning disabilities, ongoing support has tended to focus on improving academic skills (e.g., reading, writing, and mathematics) with too little attention being paid to developing the applied and social skills needed in the workplace. While many resources exist to help young people with learning disabilities improve their academic skills, there is a lack of practical information about navigating from school

to work and about the skills, accommodations, supports, and strategies they will need to successfully enter and remain in the workforce. It is our hope that the materials in this Guide will help to fill this gap.

Successful Workplace Outcomes

Inherent in the term “transition to adulthood” is the recognition that an individual will likely spend less time in educational settings and more time pursuing career interests as their transition unfolds. Nearly everyone has a time when they stop thinking of themselves as a student and start thinking of themselves as part of the workforce. For some, this happens quickly; for others, it is a gradual process that may take years. Whenever it happens, success will hinge on several elements including the individual’s knowledge, skills, and abilities; the availability of employment-related supports; and the individual’s capacity to respond to the employer’s needs.

The dilemma for many people with learning disabilities is how to present themselves and their disability (if they choose to disclose) in such a manner that potential employers understand how the individual will meet their needs if they are hired. The *Guideposts for Success* can help these youth obtain the skills they will need to be valued as prospective employees.

The next three chapters of this Guide will focus on utilizing the *Guideposts* to support youth with learning disabilities in the acquisition of new skills and strategic approaches to maximize their employability. Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of strategies that optimize an individual’s ability to learn and understand new material or skills in the context of the workplace; to integrate this new information with what they already know in a way that makes sense; and to be able to apply the new information to a different situation or place.