

Blazing the Trail: A New Direction for Youth Development & Leadership:

YOUTH CALL-TO-ACTION



**National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth,
Institute for Educational Leadership**

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NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative
is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with
disabilities into their service strategies.

Information on the Collaborative can be found at
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WHY BLAZING THE TRAIL?

In August 2007, more than 200 youth and adults came together in Washington D.C. to discuss what action steps should be done to ensure that young people are best prepared to move successfully from youth to adulthood. A major purpose of the event, called *Blazing the Trail: A New Direction in Youth Development & Leadership*, was to talk about improvements that should be made in laws, policies, and ways that adults communicate with youth. The desire to address these issues came from research that shows that youth who participate in youth development and leadership experiences are more likely to do well in school, be involved in their community, and positively transition from youth to adulthood. Some common youth development and leadership experiences may include participating in an extracurricular activity at school; taking a class for important tests like the ACT, SAT, or GED; completing an internship; or participating in a community service project.

Because youth with disabilities are often not included in programs that provide these great opportunities for growth and development, a specific emphasis at the *Blazing the Trail* Summit was placed on making sure that youth with disabilities (including those with mental health needs) are included in everything that is available to all other youth. Among the variety of participants, at least 50 of the spaces were set aside for youth and young adults with and without disabilities. Other attendees included leaders in the youth development/leadership field; national, state and local youth development and leadership programs; researchers; public and private funders; representatives of Federal and state government; and family members.

Youth Development is a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models that focus solely on youth problems;

Youth Leadership is (1) “The ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence the opinion and behavior of other people, and show the way by going in advance” (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998); and (2) “The ability to analyze one’s own strengths and weaknesses, set personal and vocational goals, and have the self-esteem to carry them out. It includes the ability to identify community resources and use them, not only to live independently, but also to establish support networks to participate in community life and to affect positive social change” (Adolescent Employment Readiness Center, Children’s Hospital. n.d.).

The Summit itself was organized by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth), a national technical assistance center supported by the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). Other lead planners included the Federal National Partnership for the Transformation of Children's Mental Health, the Federal Partners in Transition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

There were many reasons these groups chose to host the Summit; here are some of the main ones:

- Research proves that the best way for youth to become active in their communities and make a difference in society is to have opportunities to participate in a variety of youth development activities. This is equally true for youth with disabilities. It also shows that providing youth with opportunities to gain leadership skills prepares them even more for adulthood.
- The Federal government clearly understands that youth with disabilities and their families should be the key decision-makers and focus of the services they provide and policies they make. In order to make sure this happens well, youth need to be confident and gain self-esteem by learning specific leadership skills that include self-determination, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, and self-sufficiency.
- Currently there are not many opportunities available for youth with disabilities, including those with mental health needs, to participate in youth development and leadership activities.
- Multiple Federal agencies fund and even manage youth development and leadership as part of their work. Unfortunately, most of their work is based on their own needs and goals, and does not coordinate with other agencies and groups.
- Many common leadership development programs do not include youth with disabilities, including youth with mental health needs.
- By coming together and working together more, Federal agencies, state and local governments, civic organizations, and foundations can create stronger, more effective partnerships. This would ultimately create more youth development and leadership opportunities for all youth, including youth with disabilities.

Keeping these ideas in mind, the planners created the following goals for the Summit:

- Reach many different groups of people involved in the lives of young people, including educators, employers, families, government workers, and people working in various youth programs by increasing their knowledge and awareness of the importance of youth development and leadership.
- Create partnerships between government agencies and other organizations that fund and manage youth development and leadership activities.
- Make more youth development and leadership opportunities available for all youth, including youth with disabilities.
- Promote and create more opportunities for youth with disabilities, including youth with mental health needs, to participate in programs that do not normally include them.
- Invite and encourage youth to play a major role in helping make decisions about the rules and policies that affect them.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

At the *Blazing the Trail Summit*, participants agreed upon a variety of actions that need to happen to improve outcomes within the youth development and leadership field. They also discussed steps that should be taken to make sure that all young people with disabilities are always included. This includes youth with mental health needs. During the Summit, groups were broken up into the following five areas of youth development and leadership: learning, connecting, thriving, working, and leading. These areas come from a [research-based outline](#) that shares that all youth need support and opportunities in these five areas in order to achieve positive outcomes.

The priority actions created at the *Blazing the Trail Summit* did include quite a few things that adults need to do to make youth development and leadership opportunities. However, participants specifically identified action items that you as a young person can carry out to help make sure you have the best, most positive outcomes as you transition from youth to adulthood.

Here are ten things that young people can do:

1. **Learn your Rights and Responsibilities** – Youth are often not well-educated on their rights and responsibilities. Whether you're interacting with people in school, the workplace, or around the community, most people will assume you know everything you need to know, and that you will speak up. If you desire to make the best decisions about your future, you should know what you're entitled to and what you must do in order to achieve certain goals. This includes learning laws and policies that discuss education, transportation, communication, and employment. For youth with disabilities, this also means learning about specific services, accommodations, and employment options. In addition, you should understand your rights concerning disclosure if you have a disability. To learn more about disability disclosure, check out <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/topic/disability-disclosure>. As a young person, it is important to recognize and carry out the personal and social responsibilities that will ultimately help you become a successful adult.
2. **Connect to the Community** – Becoming involved in your community provides great opportunities for you to develop your own identity, stretch your boundaries, share common experiences, and gain leadership skills. This is true for all youth, including youth with disabilities. Participating in the community can include serving on boards of directors for youth/disability serving organizations, becoming a part of a youth advisory council, or participating in local meetings and activities such as those hosted by the Chamber of Commerce or the Center for Independent Living. Connecting to the community may also include community service involvement, or getting involved in political activities.

As you begin to connect, consider pushing for the following outcomes both locally and nationally:

- Increased funding for youth development and leadership programs. This includes requesting more flexibility to develop partnerships with funders and other youth development and leadership programs;
 - A Youth Caucus to be created on a Federal level that brings together members committed to improving policies, programs, and funding outcomes of youth programs;
 - Individualized Transition Planning to begin in Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten instead of age 16 (the age required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act);
 - More mentoring programs that focus on various community needs, demographics, and abilities of the participants.
3. **Become a Self-Advocate** –After learning your rights and responsibilities, you should decide what you want –and do not want—for yourself. “Self-advocacy is deciding what you want, finding out how to get what you want, developing a plan, and carrying out that plan” (Protection and Advocacy, 1990). This means being responsible for a variety of things. On a personal level, you should be able to communicate to a teacher, parent, employer, or friend what you and your peers deserve or need. In addition, you have the power to inform a city council member, congressperson, senator, or governor what youth need to succeed. You might consider writing a letter to the editor of your local paper or contacting a policy maker directly. To learn about opportunities for advocacy, check out www.nclid-youth.info/resources.
4. **Learn Disability History** – Learning disability history gives young people, specifically young people with disabilities, a sense of where the disability movement has been and where it needs to go. Being aware of and understanding who and what is responsible for the current experiences of people with disabilities creates a platform to develop a sense of pride in one’s own disability. Learning things like who contributed to the entitlement to a “free appropriate public education” or who was involved in making sure that every public place is accessible to people with disabilities are just two examples of achievements made by people with disabilities for people with disabilities. To learn more about disability history, check out some of the following websites: www.museumofdisability.org, www.disabilitymuseum.org, and www.disabilityhistory.org. To test your disability knowledge, visit www.nclid-youth.info/quiz.
5. **Participate in your Transition Planning** – As you prepare to transition from high school, there are a variety of planning tools that may be used to track your progress and plan for your future. The Individual Learning Plan (ILP), also known as the Individual Graduation Plan (IGP), is a document or program that helps students establish individual learning goals and objectives. It focuses on specific strengths, challenges, interests, and learning styles. While it is typically used in the school setting between the student and the teacher, it can also be used as a personal guide or with other teams or organizations. Other transition planning documents that you may use include the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) and the Individualized Transition Plan (ITP). The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a critical planning component for young people with disabilities, particularly when it comes to deciding what will happen following high school. Participating in transition planning meetings for programs like the ILP and IEP is the most

significant way you can speak up for what you want your future to look like. It's also important to consider how you might coordinate multiple plans if you receive services from more than one agency. This will help things run much more smoothly as you plan for your future.

6. **Research and Apply for Scholarships** – For many young people, determining how they will pay for school and other activities following school is a big concern. No matter your experiences or areas of interest, there are numerous scholarships available to help you pay for school programs, college, trainings, or internships. Some are specifically designed for youth with disabilities. Top scholarship websites include www.fastweb.com, www.collegescholarships.org, and www.collegenet.com. For a list of disability-specific scholarships, visit the following: www.disaboom.com/scholarships, www.disabilityscholarships.us, and www.disabled-world.com/disability/education/schoalrships/. The earlier you begin researching and applying for scholarships, the more likely you will be to get one or more.
7. **Participate in Internships or Other Work-Based Experiences** – Participating in an internship is the ideal way to prepare for the transition from school to the world of work. An internship offers great exposure to career fields that you may be interested in without requiring you to make any long-term commitments. Internships are also beneficial because they are often structured, supervised professional experiences where you can gain a variety of skills you might not find in the classroom. Job-shadowing and mentoring programs are other work-based experiences that offer career preparation for youth, including youth with disabilities.
8. **Find or Become A Mentor** – Research shows that mentoring is one of the most important ways to help youth make a positive transition from youth to adulthood, not to mention the most rewarding. Find a program in your area and connect with a mentor. You should also consider becoming a peer mentor to another young person; it's a great way to serve as a friend and role model for someone else looking for a connection, all the while you gain a variety of skills to prepare for the world of work and other adult experiences. Check here to learn more about mentoring <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/topic/mentoring>.
9. **Serve on Decision-Making Boards** – A great way to ensure that youth voice is valued within a program or organization is to participate as a youth board member. Serving on a board puts you at the decision-making table, for a change, allowing you to help decide program design, policy development, and the overall organizational structure. Moreover, when youth are given voting rights on a board, it places them on a level playing field with adult decision-makers. In some cases, youth board members are compensated for their time at meetings, including receiving travel and meal reimbursements. Examples of boards that include youth include state education boards, independent living councils, state rehabilitation councils, and various other nonprofit organizations.
10. **Help Train Those Who Work with Youth** – No one understands or recognizes the needs of a young person more than a young person, him or herself. Being involved in all aspects of training, hiring, and even evaluating staff of youth service professionals is an ideal way for young people

to ensure their needs and the needs of others are being met. This is yet another example that proves the value of your experience, skills, and personality.

There is definitely a lot to be done around the country to make sure that everyone is on the same page about the needs of youth and young adults, including youth with disabilities. It is important that both youth and adults recognize the role that they can play in improving youth outcomes as they leave the school setting. *Blazing the Trail* was an important step in beginning this conversation. The Summit planners and participants hope that young people will choose to be active participants in this powerful movement.

WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

The *Blazing the Trail* Summit provided a great space for youth and adults from a variety of backgrounds and organizations to come together to better understand one another. Certain challenges and issues did come up, such as trying to make sure that everyone had the same ideas about specific terms and definitions. For example, there were differences with regard to how different groups define “youth,” the expectations they have of them, and how they measure success. In addition, participants that didn’t typically work with youth with disabilities weren’t very familiar with terms from the disability community, including mental health issues. On the other hand, youth and adults that were familiar with terms used within the disability field were less familiar with words used in the larger area of youth development and leadership.

Overall, the outcomes of the Summit were positive. Participants had opportunities to create partnerships and network, gain greater knowledge and awareness about a variety of issues, and learn ways to include youth with disabilities in programs, including youth with mental health needs. In addition, the breakout groups allowed participants to figure out the really important matters that should be a national priority within the youth development and leadership field. It was the perfect space for youth to offer their true opinions and thoughts about laws, policies, and programs that affect them.