National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability

NCWD For Youth

Navigating the Road to Work
Making the Connection between
Youth with Disabilities & Employment

Practice*Brief*

NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE ON WORKFORCE AND DISABILITY FOR YOUTH | *ISSUE 5 – SEPTEMBER 2013*

Youth Development and Leadership:
Opportunities to Develop Connecting Competencies

Defining Youth Development and Leadership

The terms "youth development" and "youth leadership" are often used interchangeably even though they refer to distinctly different but related concepts. As a result, it is important to clearly define the two concepts before looking at how programs and organizations can put them into practice. *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 that 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. NCWD/Youth adapted this definition from research conducted by National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) and the National Collaboration for Youth (NYC).

Youth leadership is a part of the youth development process and concerns "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). Youth leadership is also 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 building skills 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 effect positive social change. (Adolescent Employment Readiness Center, Children's Hospital, n.d.).

Studies indicate that participating in youth development programs and activities increases youth outcomes, including increasing positive attitudes and behaviors (such as motivation, academic performance, self-esteem, problem-solving, positive health decisions, and interpersonal skills). Youth development programs and activities have also been found to reduce negative behaviors such as alcohol and tobacco use and violence. Participation in leadership development experiences is linked to increased self-efficacy and the development of

This Innovative Strategies Practice Brief provides practical examples from promising and exemplary youth programs for implementing youth development and leadership opportunities that help youth develop Connecting competencies. Some of the youth programs featured in this brief have been recognized by NCWD/Youth as Innovative Strategies. NCWD/Youth Innovative Strategies feature programs and organizations that serve youth with disabilities either as a target population or as part of other youth populations.

skills relevant to success in adulthood and the workplace such as decision-making and working well with others. Building self-advocacy and self-determination skills, an important aspect of leadership development for youth with disabilities, correlates with making a successful transition to adulthood. See Youth Development and Leadership: A White Paper for a fuller description of research findings on youth development and youth leadership.

Youth Development and Leadership (YD/L) in Practice

Strategies for implementing youth development and leadership in programs can be organized according to five broad youth development competency areas: Connecting, Thriving, Leading, Working, and Learning. Based upon a framework of youth development created by the Forum for Youth Investment (Ferber, Pittman, & Marshall, 2002), each of these five competency areas are explained in NCWD/Youth's Digging Deeper: The Five Areas of Youth Development & Leadership; Youth Development and Leadership in Programs; and Youth Development and Leadership: A White Paper. These documents also provide information on how organizations can develop and implement youth development and leadership program strategies to help youth achieve outcomes in all five competency areas.

This Innovative Strategies Practice Brief highlights practical strategies for helping youth develop competencies in one of the competency areas—**Connecting**.

Strategies for Developing Connecting Competencies

Connecting is the youth development competency area that involves developing and using positive social behaviors, skills, and attitudes. As a result, the Connecting innovative strategies described in this section focus primarily on developing and maintaining positive, supportive relationships with caring adults, peers, and families.

Some of the strategies that programs and organizations use to help youth develop competencies for Connecting include:

- Providing Mentoring Activities that Develop Positive Relationships with Adults
- Conducting Peer Mentoring Activities Designed to Build Quality Peer-to-Peer Relationships
- Connecting Youth with Disabilities with Mentors and Role Models both with and without Disabilities
- Involving Families in Supporting Youth Transition

Examples of how youth programs and organizations implement each of these strategies are described below.

Providing Mentoring Activities that Develop Positive Relationships with Adults

YouthBuild McLean County in Illinois is a charter school and non-profit organization that helps unemployed and under-educated youth, ages 16 to 24, earn their high school diploma or GED while learning construction skills by building affordable housing for homeless and low-income families and individuals. YouthBuild McLean County is part of the national non-profit YouthBuild USA network. Since 1994, YouthBuild USA has educated and trained more than 110,000 youth at 273 locations throughout the nation.

As a part of its comprehensive youth program, YouthBuild McLean County matches youth with caring adult mentors who are volunteers from the local community. The mentor's role is to provide guidance and support to the youth as they navigate their way through various education, employment, and life challenges. YouthBuild McLean County has been successful recruiting volunteer mentors by developing partnerships with local businesses and organizations. For example, they developed a partnership with State Farm Insurance Corporation, which encourages its employees to volunteer in the local community. YouthBuild McLean County staff train and match State Farm's employees with youth participants. The mentors meet with the youth at least four hours per month and must commit to mentoring the youth for a 15-month program period. As a part of the YouthBuild Mentoring Alliance, YouthBuild McLean County uses various resources provided by YouthBuild USA for training and supporting its mentors and mentees. The resources include a Mentee Training Toolkit, Mentor Pre-Match Training Toolkit, a YouthBuild mentee guidebook, and a mentor handbook. ([See these publications online](#).) The program supports the mentors in successfully engaging with their mentees by providing online guidance including "Tips for Being a Great Mentor" and "Activity Ideas for Mentors and Mentees." ([See the resources online](#)).

Humanim is a private, not-for-profit agency that provides a comprehensive array of clinical, residential, and vocational services to promote the success of adults and children with disabilities throughout Maryland. Mentoring is an important component of two Humanim youth programs, [Start on Succes (SOS)](#) and the [Ready to Achieve Mentoring Program (RAMP)](#)™.

Originally launched by the National Organization on Disability (NOD) in Philadelphia and expanded to additional sites including Baltimore, MD, Start on Success is a national youth program model that engages students with disabilities in paid internship opportunities during their senior year of high school. Humanim is one of several organizations across the country currently operating SOS programs. In addition to hosting student interns and serving as industry advisors, Humanim's employer partners provide mentors for each youth participating in SOS.

Humanim aims to match each StOS youth intern with a mentor who is an employee at the youth's internship site but is not the youth's workplace supervisor. Having a mentor who is not the internship supervisor ensures that the youth have someone who they can talk to about any aspects of their internship experience, including how to communicate and work well with their supervisor. Humanim trains the mentors to serve as a sounding board and provide encouragement and guidance to the youth as they navigate the world of work for the first time. In addition to supporting youth at work, Humanim's mentors often interact with the youth outside of workplace. NOD's [Start on Success Mentor Manual](#) provides guidance to mentors as well as the internship supervisors on the purpose and responsibilities of mentoring.

In addition to SOS, Humanim also operates RAMP, a high-tech, career-focused mentoring program for youth involved with or at risk of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system. RAMP is a national youth program model developed by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) based upon the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth's (NCWD/Youth) [Guideposts for Success](#), [Paving the Way to Work: A Guide to Career-](#)

Focused Mentoring for Youth with Disabilities, and other research-based resources.

As a part of RAMP, Humanim engages youth in weekly career preparation-focused group meetings, which include peer-supported goal setting and exploration of careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). Each youth is matched with an individual adult mentor whom Humanim recruits from the community, schools, employers, and partner organizations. Each youth works with his or her mentor to develop and implement an *Individualized Mentoring Plan (IMP)*. The IMP helps youth and mentors identify youth strengths and areas for growth and provide structure for the youth and mentor to work on setting and achieving short and long-term goals. The RAMP IMP is designed using elements of Universal Design for Learning and is aligned with the five competency areas of youth development: Learning, Working, Connecting, Thriving, and Leading.

Conducting Peer Mentoring Activities Designed to Build Quality Peer-to-Peer Relationships

Partners for Youth with Disabilities, Inc. (PYD) is a Massachusetts-based nonprofit organization which provides mentoring services to youth with disabilities. PYD promotes mentoring on a national level through its National Disability Mentoring Council, and locally through a number of youth programs located in the greater Boston area, including the Peer Leadership Program (learn more at http://www.pyd.org/peer-leaders.php). Every year, the Peer Leadership Program enrolls 30 youth aged 16-24, with and without disabilities. Participants perform community service, mentor local youth with

disabilities, and hone their leadership and relational skills at monthly trainings. At these leadership trainings, peer leaders practice public speaking and learn to advocate for themselves and to engage other youth in self-advocacy. They also learn to create a welcoming environment for their disabled peers by making communication accessible to everyone and engaging people who are struggling to join a conversation. This helps peer leaders build friendships with each other and with their mentees.

Both PYD's peer leaders and their mentees report that participation in the program has improved their social life and increased their ability to form friendships. For some youth with disabilities, the Peer Leadership Program offers their first opportunity to feel accepted and comfortable in a supportive and safe environment. Many of the youth who are mentored by peer leaders go on to participate in the Peer Leadership Program themselves.

University of Washington's DO-IT (Disabilities Opportunities Internetworking Technology) Scholars Program aims to increase the participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers by promoting the use of computing and networking technologies to increase independence, productivity, and participation in education and employment. Each year, a group of Washington state high school students with disabilities are selected to participate in the program during the summer and year-round for a period of two or more years. The program encourages students to develop and strengthen their leadership skills through peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities within the program.

During their second summer in the program, DO-IT Scholars serve as peer mentors for incoming DO-IT Scholars. Once they have

completed the program, DO-IT Scholars are invited to become DO-IT Ambassadors who assist and mentor the current program participants. This often includes participating on panels and e-mentoring discussions to share their own experiences completing the program and transitioning to college following high school. E-mentoring is a form of mentoring in which mentors and mentees use computer-mediated communication to communicate with one another.

DO-IT Scholars receive mentoring from both peers and adults year-round through e-mentoring as well as in-person interactions during the summer sessions at the University of Washington's campus. DO-IT has created an online manual for replicating its successful program practices called, *Creating a Transition Program for Teens: How DO-IT Does It, and How You Can Do It, Too*, which includes a chapter on "Peer and Mentor Support." DO-IT also offers guidance on e-mentoring strategies in the online publication, *Creating an E-Mentoring Community: How DO-IT does it, and how you can do it, too*.

Connecting Youth with Disabilities with Mentors and Role Models both with and without Disabilities

Eye to Eye is a national organization with over 50 local chapters that operate an innovative afterschool mentoring program for students with learning disabilities (LD) and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Eye to Eye matches high school or college students with LD and/or ADHD with middle or elementary school students with the same disabilities. By matching the younger mentees with older peer mentors with disabilities, the program aims to provide the younger youth with role models "who can demonstrate the power and importance of goal

setting, securing individualized accommodations, and self-advocacy skills" (Eye to Eye, 2013).

Eye to Eye recognizes that children and youth with disabilities often struggle with low self-esteem due to the societal stigma related to their disabilities. Many also lack opportunities to discuss their disabilities openly with other individuals who have had similar experiences. For this reason, Eye to Eye trains its mentors on ways to help youth build their self-esteem and become comfortable discussing their disability with others. The mentors receive three hours of formal training on how the Eye to Eye program model works including how to use discussion about their own personal experiences with a disability to help the mentees grow. For more information see Eye to Eye mentor training.

The mentoring activities are intentionally structured to help the mentees:

- Discover and embrace their learning styles to help them better understand their learning differences.
- Speak up positively and appropriately for their unique needs.
- Integrate alternative learning styles with concrete academic skills such as note-taking, organization, study skills, reading, writing, and math strategies.
- Create personalized goals and accommodations they can discuss with their teachers, family, and other school personnel during IEP, 504, and parent-teacher planning meetings.

Eye to Eye uses art-based activities to facilitate mentee-mentor conversations about disability and promote a positive sense of self among the mentees. Eye to Eye's mentoring approach is art-based because "art has no rules and removes barriers to learning. You can use art however you choose to express your unique way

of thinking." More details about how the Eye to Eye art-based approach works are online.

Partners for Youth with Disabilities, Inc.'s (PYD) Mentor Match program is an example of a program that matches youth with disabilities with adults who do not necessarily have disabilities (learn more at http://www.pyd.org/mentor-match.php). The program is designed to help young people with disabilities to fulfill their potential for personal development and independence in adulthood by creating one-to-one mentoring matches with a caring adult. Matches are expected to commit for one-year, have weekly contact (email, phone, or in person), and meet in person for a minimum of 4-6 hours a month over the course of one or more meetings. While the adult mentor may have a disability, some mentors do not have disabilities.

To prepare mentors to effectively mentor youth with disabilities, PYD has developed a specialized mentor training. PYD's *Mentoring 101: An Introductory Workshop for New Mentors* is a training manual for adult volunteers interested in mentoring youth with disabilities. This training manual provides various training tools to help the Mentor Match program and other programs and organizations train mentors on topics such as: how to protect the youth's right to privacy and to decide for himself or herself about whether, when, and how to disclose a disability; how to obtain and use reasonable accommodations to ensure any youth and mentors with disabilities can fully participate in the program activities; learning about the youth's and/or mentor's specific disability (where to find basic information on specific disabilities); and recognizing the importance of avoiding generalizations based on disability and instead focusing on each youth's individual strengths, challenges, experiences, and perspectives. PYD also offers technical assistance and training at the national level to organizations interested in developing mentoring programs for youth and others with disabilities. PDY's *Best Practices Manual* provides tools to help start inclusive mentoring programs and expand existing ones.

Engaging Families in Supporting Youth Transition

Families Together in New York State is a non-profit, family-run organization that strives to establish a unified voice for children and youth with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Families Together is home to YOUTH POWER!, the New York State network of young people with disabilities and social-emotional challenges. YOUTH POWER! at Families Together in Albany County, NY, is a Ready to Achieve Mentoring Program (RAMP)™ site.

Engaging families is an important part of YOUTH POWER!'s RAMP program all year long. When youth are referred to RAMP, the Project Manager meets with their families to tell them about the program, learn more about the youth and their family, and request enrollment information. The RAMP Mentoring Coordinator uses many channels of communication to keep in contact with participants' families throughout the year, including phone calls, text messaging, mailings, and emails. Structured activities such as such as "Meet the Mentoring Coordinator" events, or field trips which family members chaperone, keep families involved. Program staff also use pick-up and drop-off as a chance to build relationships with participants' parents and guardians. This regular contact ensures that the families understand the purpose and value of the RAMP program, and enables the RAMP staff to support participants' families in supporting their youth.

As part of the RAMP program, participants set long-term goals in their Individualized Mentoring Plans (IMPs), as well as weekly goals which help them move towards the objectives of their IMPs. Input from the family is a part of the goal-setting process. If a family member conveys an area of concern to the Mentoring Coordinator or the youth's mentor, this concern can be incorporated into the youth's program goals. For instance, after speaking with a parent about a mentee constantly fighting with a sibling, the Mentoring Coordinator - in conjunction with the youth's mentor - worked with the youth to develop a list of things to do instead of picking a fight. The youth then set goals to do these things (e.g., go for a walk) when he felt the urge to start an argument with his sibling. At the closing of the program, this participant's parents reported that the constant fighting had markedly decreased and home life was more peaceful. Many other parents and family members have also reported to the program staff that their children or relatives have become more connected to their families as a result of participating in RAMP.

Humanim's RAMP staff discovered an effective way of increasing family involvement by asking families for input on how they would like to be engaged. During Humanim's "Meet Your Mentor Night," RAMP staff held a separate information session just for family members of youth participants. At this session, program staff asked family members for suggestions on how to increase their involvement. The families suggested holding regular parental involvement meetings. The recommendation was acted upon, and the parental involvement meetings are now coordinated by two parents who were nominated as group leaders. The group leaders determine what topics will be discussed at each meeting. Some of the topics covered in recent meetings have included: information on useful community resources; a review and discussion of the RAMP curriculum and mentors' role and responsibilities; and families' concerns about their youth's educational experience. Humanim has found the families appreciate the opportunity to meet with each other and create their own support system. Humanim has shared its Parental Involvement Group Invitation and Sign-Up Sheet.

Boston Public Schools' Parent University is a leading example of strategies to increase school-based family involvement. Since 2008, Boston Public Schools (BPS) has been using the Parent University to create family-school partnerships. BPS' Parent University is designed to build the capacity of students' parents and families to support their academic success. The Parent University does this by offering day-long learning sessions on Saturdays three times per year in topics such as child development, what students are learning by grade level, and skills for advocacy, leadership, and effective parenting. BPS also offers additional learning sessions throughout the year in local community centers, libraries, and schools. The Parent University strategy was created by a school district administrator who started out as a frustrated parent and became involved in school leadership and eventually administration at the encouragement of her daughter's high school principal.

The Georgia Department of Education's Parent Mentor Program has successfully increased family involvement among students receiving special education services. The Parent Mentor Partnership started in 2002 with a pilot in which several local school districts hired a parent of a student with disabilities to serve as a mentor to other parents. The parent mentor's role is to assist and support other parents and families in

becoming involved in their child's education. Because they can relate to the families' experiences, the parent mentors are particularly effective at understanding other families' needs and communicating with them. Parent mentors partner with the school to select specific school performance goals that they can help the school achieve through family engagement activities. For example, parent mentors have helped schools increase the percentage of students with disabilities who transition to employment or postsecondary education by organizing transition fairs to provide information to families and students about various post-school options. Parent mentors have also organized trainings for families on transition options and provide online resources such as "Transition Planning Tips from a Parent Mentor." The Georgia Department of Education has created the *Parent Mentor Partnership Toolkit* to share its strategies with those interested in replicating the model.

Other Tools and Resources

The following tools and resources may be useful to organizations seeking to implement or strengthen the strategies described in this brief:

Mentoring

- *Paving the Way to Work: A Guide to Career-Focused Mentoring*
- *The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Families, Educators, Youth Service Professionals (YSPs), and Other Adult Allies Who Care About Youth With Disabilities*
- *Plotting the Course for Success: An Individualized Mentoring Plan for Youth with Disabilities*
- MENTOR: Mentoring Program Resources

Family Involvement

- *The Guideposts for Success: A Framework for Families Preparing Youth for Adulthood*
- *All NCWD/Youth Publications for Families*
- *The PACER Center*
- *District Leaders Network on Family and Community Engagement*
- *Harvard Family Research Project, Family Involvement Resources*
- *Partnering for School Success, University of Minnesota Extension and University of Minnesota Children, Youth and Family Consortium*

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