

# Let's Get to Work Wisconsin: Launching youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities into the workforce

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## Abstract.

**BACKGROUND:** Beginning in spring 2012, Wisconsin's *Let's Get to Work* (LGTW) project spent four years working with pilot school sites and state agency personnel to implement practice and policy changes designed to elevate expectations along with employment outcomes for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). This need was underscored by data demonstrating inconsistent transition practices across the state in conjunction with policy obstacles hindering employment for individuals with I/DD. Analysis of Wisconsin's 2010 post-school outcomes survey of high school students who exited in the 2008-09 school year indicated that only 14% with I/DD were employed at integrated competitive jobs. Similarly, individuals with I/DD enrolled in the adult long-term care system achieved community-based employment rates of less than 15%. To foster improved employment outcomes, LGTW employed a multi-level approach including: 1) direct work with high school pilot sites to increase utilization of evidence-based transition practices and identify policy needs; 2) coaching for school staff to implement effective transition strategies, develop resources, and generate policy ideas; 3) quarterly consortium meetings comprised of key state-level stakeholders; and, 4) policy work to formalize and take action on school and consortium recommendations.

**OBJECTIVE:** This article discusses the characteristics and impact of Wisconsin's *Let's Get to Work* (LGTW) project.

**CONCLUSION:** Over the course of the project, 73% of students who received interventions through school coaching had one or more paid work experience, a strong predictor of employment in adulthood. Numerous local and statewide policy changes were made, including expanded application of project strategies and resources. Analysis of the 2016 post-school outcomes survey data placed the rate of competitive integrated employment for 2014-15 high school exiters with I/DD at 24% in Wisconsin, up 10 percentage points statewide over the six-year period between 2010 and 2016.

Keywords: Intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), employment, young adults

## 1. Introduction

Five years ago, David was a junior in high school gaining work experience by helping bake and sell cookies during lunch and washing windows around the school building. He took a business tour of a hotel with teachers and other students, and expressed

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an interest in the housekeeping work. He had a work experience supported by vocational rehabilitation that led to a job. He has been competitively employed for several years now at that same hotel. He also manages the basketball team at the state college campus in his city.

After initial resistance, James' parents agreed to allow him to participate in the grant project to seek competitive integrated employment. School staff helped him obtain a job working for a large insurance company. After several years, James is still working there today, and his employment video was sent by the company to thousands of employees.

During high school, Kayla knew she wanted to work at a restaurant. She already enjoyed working at the school's coffee shop. She just needed support to learn new habits and skills to make that happen in the community. Her transition teacher believed in her, and worked with her to find a job doing prep work at a restaurant in her community.

Kayla's friend Cullen had been stringing beads for many years, and already sold keychains he had made to his peers at school at the onset of the project. The same transition teacher who assisted Kayla to get a job prepping food supported Cullen to begin working for a bead and jewelry store in town. Now, he produces beautiful bracelets that are very popular.

David, James, Kayla, and Cullen are all making competitive wages working at community businesses. They are on the path to a lifetime of productivity, community engagement, and being tax-paying members of society. They also all have intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Each of their schools participated in Wisconsin Let's Get to Work (LGTW), one of the eight Partnerships in Employment states that received funding from the federal Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD) employment demonstration project starting in 2012.

## **2. Background: Pre-project the state of the state**

In Wisconsin, as nationally, the competitive integrated employment rate for youth and young adults with I/DD was, and still is, among the lowest of all disability sub-groups (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011). A recent analysis of the National Longitudinal Transition Study Wave 2 (NLTS2) data found only 27.9% of youth with intellectual disabilities, autism, and multiple disabilities were employed (Carter, Austin, &

Trainor, 2012). Another study put the percentage of youth with I/DD employed in integrated jobs with competitive wages at only 14.2% (Simonsen, 2010). A Wisconsin study conducted with 130 participants placed rates of community employment for youth with I/DD at approximately 16% (Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, Swedeen, & Owens, 2010). The figure obtained from the Wisconsin IDEA Indicator 14 data in 2010 matched the 16% employment rate found in that study. In contrast, data indicated the employment rate for youth without disabilities during that period was nearly 66%. This low rate of employment continues into adulthood, as less than 15% of people with developmental disabilities participating in Wisconsin's long-term care system are employed in integrated competitive jobs.

In 2010, more than 10,000 individuals with disabilities in Wisconsin worked under 14(c) special subminimum wage certificates, which at that time was the highest rate of any state in the upper Midwest (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Of those 10,000 plus people, half (50%) earned less than \$2.00 per hour and nearly a quarter (24%) earned less than \$1.00 per hour. The need for targeted efforts to address lagging employment outcomes for youth with I/DD was clear. An initial step for the LGTW project team was to bring together subject matter experts through a consortium of stakeholders that included state agency personnel, educators, family members, and policy makers, to identify possible reasons people with I/DD experience low rates of employment.

The first cited was low societal expectations that commonly included facility-based work as an option, sometimes even the only option, when planning transition from high school for youth with I/DD. The second was the degree of resistance to integrated employment expressed by family members who had been part of the planning toward facility-based employment led by professionals for multiple years. This was thought to be compounded for family members whose daughters and sons had not typically been included in general education classes and extra-curricular activities to the fullest extent possible during their school years. In addition, facility-based employment at sub-minimum wage was an option made readily available in many parts of the state for some youth starting before they officially exited from school services. Another practice that discouraged individuals and families was vocational rehabilitation (VR) waiting until one year prior to school exit before engaging students with I/DD and their families to explore competitive integrated employment.

Although Wisconsin had an interagency agreement pertaining to transition practices in place for several years prior to LGTW, the state education authority (SEA) and Medicaid long-term care system could benefit from more clearly defined employment-related policies and local-level benchmarks. A portion of communities in Wisconsin relied heavily on facility-based vocational training and employment for students and adults with I/DD. Where this was the standard of practice, students with I/DD typically did not work with VR at all, or did so for only a short period of time during their final year of school. Anecdotal information indicated that not all educators and family members were aware of the broad range of employment options for youth with I/DD prior to the LGTW project. State agencies had, however, begun to create policy incentives to encourage systemic practice changes that primed partners for project engagement. Aims of Wisconsin LGTW were developed based on the expressed intent and expectations of the AIDD, in conjunction with working knowledge of the current state of the state.

### *2.1. LGTW project goals*

The Wisconsin LGTW project developed three overarching goals to: 1) generate public policy and legislative recommendations to influence changes in practice to increase the percentage of youth with I/DD in Wisconsin and nationally who are employed in integrated competitive jobs; 2) raise stakeholder expectations and heighten awareness of policies and practices that impact employment outcomes for youth with I/DD, and; 3) evaluate project outcomes in preparation for dissemination and replication. These three objectives were met via the implementation of four multi-level project components that comprised the work plan.

### *2.2. Project work plan*

The four multi-level components of the LGTW project included: 1) conducting quarterly consortium meetings with key stakeholders; 2) funding high school pilot sites and implementing research-based strategies with a set of youth to expand employment outcomes and inform policy team recommendations; 3) coaching to pilot school sites to facilitate the implementation of identified strategies, assess efficacy, and develop plans for replication, and, 4) facilitating a policy team to strategize, develop

and assist in implementing public policy recommendations from the project. A combination of qualitative and quantitative evaluation measures was used to determine outcomes. In addition, the project team focused on sustainability through dissemination of project findings and resources, including the sharing of youth employment success stories.

#### *2.2.1. Statewide stakeholder consortium*

Research has identified the need for collaboration among multiple partners to facilitate policy and practice change in transition (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; Kohler & Field, 2003). The LGTW consortium was integral to the success of the project with nearly 40 organizations represented. Partners included the state Departments of Public Instruction and Health Services, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Disability Rights Wisconsin, the University Center for Excellence on Developmental Disabilities, the Board for People with Developmental Disabilities, educators from the high school pilot sites, vocational providers, managed care organizations, parents/family members, family associations, disability advocacy organizations, and students. Consortium participants provided feedback on the overall direction and progress of the project and took information generated at meetings back to their respective organizations.

Quarterly meetings featured updates from each of the state agencies as well as school progress reports. The meetings allowed school personnel to share project activities as well as hear from each other and agency representatives. This allowed time to be spent both cross-pollinating ideas that were working and brain-storming strategies to overcome commonly identified barriers. For example, multiple schools expressed challenges with finding transportation for students to and from jobs and getting training for job coaches. Members discussed resources and potential solutions related to such barriers.

In addition to sharing ideas and strategies, a topic of the day was selected for each meeting and speakers selected to present information on the chosen subject. A sample of the topics covered were: VR requirements and practices, transition planning, post-secondary education (Think College), community building, Academic Career Planning, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and Supported Decision Making. Affording opportunities for student involvement in transition planning activities was deemed essential by project staff

Table 1  
LGTW pilot school demographic information (pilot site  $n=9$ )

Town or city Size	Project start month/year	# of High Schools	Secondary student population	% of students with disabilities	% of students with I/DD	# of students who received LGTW interventions
Town, Distant	Spring 2012	1	1172	6.9%	3.3%	7
Town, Distant	Spring 2012	1	763	12.7%	2.6%	6
Town, Remote	Spring 2012	3	434	8.5%	1.9%	7
Town, Remote	Spring 2012	1	1229	17.7	4.2%	12
City, Small	Spring 2012	1	1487	12.1%	1.9%	7
Town, Remote	Spring 2013	1	130	12.5%	2.0%	6
Town, Fringe	Spring 2013	1	835	12.5%	2.2%	7
City, Small	Spring 2013	2	3183	14.4%	2.1%	6
Town, Distant	Spring 2013	1	1035	10.7%	2.3%	6

\*2 students did not remain in the project and are not represented in student demographics (Table 2) or results (Table 3).

based on the established impact of self-determination in transition outcomes (Carter, Owens, Trainor, Sun, Swedeen, 2009; Weymeyer, Palmer, Shogren, Williams-Diehm, & Soukup, 2010).

To effectively engage students, a youth track was included at consortium meetings and school sites brought students with and without disabilities to the meetings. Activities were planned to support the development of skills in areas such as social interaction, communication, self-determination, self-advocacy and employment planning. The youth track provided a meaningful way for students to be involved in the project at a higher level and have a statewide impact. Several times, youth and other consortium members spent all or part of meeting dates conducting educational visits with legislators at the state capital. Consortium member advocacy resulted in one piece of legislation being passed and several additional bills being drafted, which are still under consideration. The youth members were very effective at sharing their employment stories with legislators to facilitate better understanding about why integrated competitive employment is so important.

### 2.2.2. High school pilot sites

To demonstrate efficacy and adequately inform policy changes, LGTW used pilot sites to demonstrate how high schools could successfully support employment. Sites were selected through a competitive application process. A Request for Proposal (RFP) for small stipend grant awards was sent out through various transition list serves, announced at conferences, and included in statewide and local newsletters. In the first round of selection, 28 proposals were submitted and five were selected. The five first-round schools represented seven school districts, as three of the districts from a rural area developed

a plan to work together. In the second round, which took place a year later, four proposals were accepted out of 10 received. The second round included an urban district with two high schools. Thus, five sites representing seven schools were selected in the first round and four sites representing five schools were selected in the second round, meaning that in total, the project worked with teachers, students, and families from 12 high schools. Applications were reviewed by the six main project partners. Interest from the schools, along with a demonstrated ability to build a broad local stakeholder group, were of particular interest to the review committee. Table 1 provides a summary of demographic information from pilot school sites.

To that end, each school was asked to identify members of a core team that consisted of regular and special education teachers, students with and without disabilities, parents, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) staff, and community members. The core team would be responsible for working together on a work plan to help them meet their goal of getting each of their pilot students into paid employment within the three years they were part of the project. In addition, each school identified a change leader, or "project champion," to coordinate core team and project efforts, as recommended in organizational change literature (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Change leaders were passionate about facilitating inclusion and competitive integrated employment outcomes, and instrumental to achieving school and overall project goals. Schools in both RFP rounds were also asked to recruit a minimum of 5 youth with I/DD between the ages of 15 and 17 to participate in project activities. A total of 72 students across the LGTW pilot schools participated in the project.

Table 2  
LGTW basic student demographic information ( $n = 62$ )

	Student Demographics	Total (%)
Gender	Male	36 (58.06%)
	Female	26 (49.94%)
Age (at Project Onset)	14	1 (1.61%)
	15	4 (6.45%)
	16	23 (37.10%)
	17	21 (33.87%)
	18	9 (14.52%)
	Unknown (within 14–18 range)	4 (6.45%)

### 2.2.3. Interventions

Prior to implementation of interventions with school staff and individual students, research protocols were reviewed and approved by the University of Wisconsin-Stout Institutional Review Board. Written consent to participate was obtained from each student, parent, teacher, and community member before any data were collected. Once consent was in place, data were collected on student disability information, supports, accommodations, assistive technology, school class schedule, Individual Education Program (IEP), work and extra-curricular activities, self-determination, and quality of life. Table 2 provides basic demographic information about students who received targeted LGTW intervention strategies.

Intervention strategies focused heavily on expanding the experiences, opportunities, and relationships that youth with I/DD need to develop while still in school to prepare them for adulthood and the world of work. These were implemented based on the 5 C's of Transition Services framework developed by a project staff member and focused on (1) coordination of transition services, including fostering self-determination, (2) increasing the integration of classes and extra-curricular activities, (3) developing individualized career goals based on strengths and interests, (4) locating paid community jobs while still in high school, and (5) facilitating collaboration across system partners (Neugart, Molfenter, & Webb, 2011).

Person-centered planning with selected youth and their families, starting at age 14, was used to identify strengths, interests, career goals and direction for a course of study and extra-curricular/volunteer involvement while in high school. While there were multiple activities utilized by the project with pilot schools within all five areas, we will provide key examples in the following sections.

**2.2.3.1. Coordination.** LGTW project staff developed the Transition Services Rating Scale (TSRS) as a resource to support increased understanding of specific activities involved in evidence-based transition services coordination (Molfenter & Hartman, 2011). Specifically the scale looks at what is being done to help foster (1) individual student self-determination, (2) identifying and pursuing individualized career goals, (3) collaborating with other services and systems, (4) participating in integrated classes and extra-curricular activities (with an emphasis on connecting to vocational rehabilitation services), (5) paid integrated community work experiences, (6) post-secondary education and training, and (7) coordination of services and supports.

**2.2.3.2. Classes and extra-curricular.** Pilot school sites were asked to implement a school-wide opportunity mapping process to identify the opportunities that exist throughout the school to assist LGTW students and their support teams to select from general education classes and extra-curricular activities. Schools were provided with an established mapping tool and coaching on how to use it (Sweedon, Carter & Molfenter, 2010).

**2.2.3.3. Career goals.** LGTW project staff created a Self-Directed Employment Planning tool for teachers to use with identified students and their teams. A portion of this planning form requires gathering information about school activities and another about home and community (Neugart, Molfenter, & Webb, 2011). In this way, the tool fosters collaboration and asks teams to consider transferrable skills the student can bring to the workplace when setting an employment goal.

**2.2.3.4. Community work experiences.** Pilot schools implemented a variety of strategies to expand the options available for students to gain work experience in their communities. This activity was often completed in partnerships with local education and business groups, such a Partners in Education (PIE), career and technical education teachers (CTE), and local DVR counselors. Paid work experience for all LGTW students was set as an expectation.

**2.2.3.5. Collaboration.** Strengthening collaboration between teachers and DVR counselors to provide community work experience opportunities became a primary objective under this category. Each school site also implemented at least one community

conversation where people from various vantage points talked about increasing employment opportunities for youth with disabilities in their community. Schools were provided with an implementation guide and training on hosting a community conversation. In addition to coordinating community conversations, the LGTW project hosted a parent training on the transition from high school to adulthood for youth with disabilities. Data were collected based on interventions within each of the 5C's.

#### 2.2.4. *Coaching*

Educators at pilot schools were supported through coaching to assist them in implementing evidence-based practices. This method of technical assistance offered the opportunity for reflection, capacity building, and observable, measurable change. Coaching has been identified as a cost-effective strategy for facilitating practice change (Cook & Odom, 2013; Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2010). Over the course of the first four years of the project, the 12 pilot schools, representing 11 districts, worked with two Project Coaches. Each coach was assigned to work with specific schools. In the first year, the coaches visited each of their assigned schools every six to eight weeks to develop project goals and work plans, problem solve challenges, mentor interactions with students and employers, assist with outreach events, and help develop tools and resources to incorporate into student activities and curriculum. During visits, coaches typically met with project core team members from school sites and spent time with students targeted for interventions. This gave the teams that included special education teachers, general education teachers, administrators, VR, and community partners the opportunity to ask questions and share ideas, resulting in the growth of support for project activities. After each visit, the coaches would write up observation and discussion notes to share with each other, the school and the LGTW project lead. As the project progressed and the schools became more adept implementing best practices, the coaches visited less often.

Project coaches supported and advocated for the school staff, which built trust between them. This trust and familiarity helped school staff feel at liberty to openly discuss the struggles they were facing to implement changes. As busy teachers, having easy access to technical assistance is essential given the short amount of time in the school day to plan-out new strategies or creatively problem solve. The coaching support and site visits also held school

staff accountable to implement plans that were discussed. As schools honed their practices, coaches would “cross pollinate” the ideas and resources used to the other schools, saving schools even more time and fostering the development of realistic and sustainable practices across the project. Additionally, the coaches could identify training needs and organize group trainings on topics such as Discovery, Customized Job Development, Self-Employment, and Job Coaching; or by including a short learning component at each quarterly consortium meeting, such as Children's Long Term Supports, Work Incentives for Youth, and Academic & Career Planning. In addition to regular, on-site coaching, team leaders participated in a monthly Learning Collaborative that took place via phone to share successes, learn together and problem solve as a group. Schools agreed to administer project specific attitudinal surveys and participate in project evaluation to document efficacy of intervention strategies and to participate in the quarterly Consortium meetings.

#### 2.2.5. *Policy team*

The policy team worked to establish relationships with legislators to support policy recommendations and draft and introduce legislation. Specific outcomes related to this will be discussed in the next section. The policy team also worked on developing strong relationships with project partners, including regular meetings with state agency leaders on topics such as sustainability, provider capacity and interagency collaboration. Contract changes were made to prioritize integrated employment in the Managed Care Organization's contracts. Children's Long Term Support Services emphasized employment with new service codes for mentoring and supported employment for youth. The federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provided a response to LGTW on guidance around least restrictive environment as it applies to transition work placements. Members of the policy team also established regular, quarterly meetings with the State Superintendent to work on issues.

### 2.3. *Methods/data collection*

To measure progress toward project goals by the students at LGTW pilot schools receiving interventions, including employment, teachers reported one month's worth of student participation in extra-curricular, volunteer, work experiences, and employment activities every six months. For each

activity identified, the teacher indicated what setting the activity occurred in (whether it was an integrated or disability specific activity), how many hours the student spent in the activity, and how many months (in the past six) the student had been engaged in the activity. For each work experience and job identified, the teacher reported the wages earned in the previous month and who paid for the wages. The expectation was that the number of integrated community paid and unpaid activities that students were participating in would increase each semester at each pilot site. To support teachers to understand best practices as well as measure fidelity of implementation, teachers piloted the Transition Services Rating Scale (TSRS) with 11 students. Thus, the TSRS serves as both intervention and measure of progress in transition services via the opportunities offered to students.

Community members who attended the community conversations and parents who attended the What's After High School sessions each completed surveys about their attitudes and knowledge of employment for youth with disabilities. These surveys measured the impact of these events in terms of influence of disability on perceived employability. After attending a community conversation, participants were asked to fill out a Community Participation Capacity for Youth with I/DD Survey, as well as a Community Conversation Feedback Form (Carter, Swedeen, Cooney, Walter, & Moss, In Press). In the Community Conversation Feedback Form community members rated whether they believed youth with I/DD can work, given needed supports, in integrated community employment. Community members also shared feedback about the value of attending the community conversation. Pre- and post-surveys were used at each of the parent training sessions.

## 2.4. Evaluation

In addition to the data collected related to the interventions implemented by the pilot schools, student self-determination was measured via the American Institutes for Research (AIR) Self-Determination Assessments, and the Quality of Life Questionnaire (QOL.Q) (Schalock, Hoffman, & Keith, 1993). These were used to monitor and improve the intervention throughout the five-year project. Once a year, students, their parents, and special education teachers completed the AIR Self-Determination Assessments and QOL.Q). This allowed the evaluation team to monitor if student self-determination was increasing at the pilot sites. It also provided a way to determine if parent and teacher perception of student self-determination matched that of the student. If the student's disability prevented the student from filling out the QOL.Q, two raters, the teacher and another support person at the school or parent would fill it out as best as they could for the student, and the scores were averaged across raters. There were four scales within the QOL.Q, Satisfaction, Competence/Productivity, Empowerment/Independence, and Social Belonging/Community Integration. Each sub-scale had 10 questions where the student could earn 1 to 3 points per question. The higher scores indicated higher Quality of Life. Scores were calculated for each of the four sub scales and overall.

## 2.5. Pilot school results summary

This section will briefly describe primary project outcomes. Table 3 provides a snapshot of the data reported in this section. Students who participated in intervention activities saw an increase in inclusive

Table 3  
LGTW results summary (student  $n=62$ ) (What's After High School adult participant  $n=64$ )

Outcome Measured	Baseline (percent or mean)	Post-Intervention (percent or mean)
Percentage of Inclusive Classes	43%	70%
Quality of Life (QOL.Q - R) Survey Overall Scale Score	77	92
AIR Self-Determination Scale Student Self-report Overall Ranking	70th percentile	77th percentile
AIR Self-Determination Scale Teacher Report Overall Ranking	62nd percentile	69th percentile
Transition Services Rating Scale (TSRS) (representing transition activity opportunities afforded to youth)	48 points	141 points
Paid Community Work Experience (1 or more)	11.5%	73.0%
What's After High School Participant Self-Report of Knowledge and Understanding of their Roles and Responsibilities in Transition Planning (rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)	2.94	3.97
What's After High School Participant Self-Reported Understanding of the Difference Between a Job at a Work Center and Integrated Community Employment (rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)	3.05	4.05

general education classes and school-based extra-curricular activities. Prior to engagement with the LGTW project, the collective baseline percentage for participation in inclusive classes reported by LGTW students was approximately 43%. The average in the final data reporting period, that figure was up to just over 70%. Most LGTW students also obtained at least one paid work community experiences over the course of the project. Only 11.5% students participating in project interventions reported having had paid community work experience at the time they began with the project. As of the final outcomes reports by pilot schools, a total of 73% of students who received project interventions had at least one paid community work experience.

### 2.5.1. *Transition Services Rating Scale (TSRS)*

In measuring the implementation of the LGTW Quick Guide on Transition to Employment via the TSRS with a sample of 11 LGTW students, teachers reported (with an inter-rater reliability of 87%) a growth of increased engagement in transition services in all seven targeted areas over time, from Spring 2014 to Fall 2014 or Winter 2014/2015. Scores started as low as 33 points at initial assessment and increased to be as high as 248 points by the third assessment. Points were accumulated by increasing transition services for youth in the 7 TSRS areas. The most dramatic increase occurred in the “Classes and Extracurricular” section, where the mean points per student increased from 13, to 30, to 57 across the three assessments, respectively. In other words, the 11 students were receiving increasingly more integrated experiences in the classroom and through extra-curricular activities over time. Other notable increases occurred in the “Community Work Experience” section (9, to 27, to 40), the “Collaboration” section (9, to 25, to 40), the “Goals” section (5, to 16, to 36), “Self-Determination” section (4, to 11, to 33), and the “Postsecondary Education” section (3, to 9, to 17). The lowest growth total occurred in the “Coordination” section, where the mean point total increased from 2, to 5, to 8. The average increase across all sections of the TSRS from assessment one to assessment two was 11. The average mean increase across all sections of the TSRS from assessment two to assessment three was 15.

### 2.5.2. *Community conversations*

Most community conversation participants reported that they believed that young adults (14 to 21 years old) with significant IDD are capable

of working. Although some did disagree with the statement, with responses ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), the average response was 4.8. Most participants agreed that youth with IDD can work in competitive, integrated jobs if they have the supports they need to do so (averaging between 3.8 to 4.7 on these items), and most participants disagreed that youth with IDD cannot work or can only work in segregated settings (averaging between 1.7 and 2.7 on these items). In addition, most community conversation participants rated the community conversation as valuable, noted that their community was in a good position to help make a change, and believed the community conversation could have an impact on the employment possibilities of youth with disabilities.

In addition to the community conversations, LGTW, in collaboration with pilot school sites, hosted the “What’s After High School” trainings. Pre-and post-surveys were collected from 64 participants of this training series. Results demonstrated these parent trainings had an impact on what kind of employment parents thought was possible for their youth. A chi-squared analysis comparing pre-and post-parent self-reported knowledge and attitudes showed a significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) increase in percent of parents reporting they thought their youth can be employed inclusively in integrated employment (from 20% to 40%) and a decrease in percent of parents reporting their youth’s employment setting should be both integrated and segregated (from 30% to 10%). These changes in attitude could be explained by statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) increases in self-reported knowledge and understanding of their roles and responsibilities in transition planning (average scores increasing from 2.94 to 3.97 on a 5-point scale), and increased understanding of the difference between a job at a work center and integrated, community-based employment (average scores increasing from 3.05 to 4.05 on a 5-point scale).

### 2.5.3. *Quality of Life Questionnaire (QOL.Q) and AIR self-determination scale*

With increased integration, independence and work, students self-reported (or when a student could not self-report, teachers reported) higher quality of life via the QOL.Q, with 63 youth completing the QOL.Q at baseline, 50 at year one, and 38 at year two. Total QOL.Q scores averaged 77 at baseline, 85 after a year, and 92 after two years. The increase in scores from baseline to year one were linked to



increases in average community participation (scores increasing from 21 to 23;  $p < 0.05$ ), independence (scores increasing from 20 to 23;  $p < 0.05$ ) and work (scores increasing from 14 to 18;  $p < 0.05$ ) scores. The increases in scores from year one to year two were related to increases in average independence (scores increasing from 23 to 27;  $p < 0.05$ ). From baseline to year two, statistically significant increases were observed via increases in average community participation (scores increasing from 21 to 25;  $p < 0.05$ ), independence (scores increasing from 20 to 27;  $p < 0.05$ ) and work (scores increasing from 14 to 17;  $p < 0.05$ ) scores. Data trended up for all three groups reporting AIR Self-Determination Scale information also. Student self-report started at the 70th percentile and went to the 77th; the percentiles reported by teachers went from 62nd to 69th percentile; while parent report saw the smallest increase in percentile from 67th to 69th.

## 2.6. Policy outcomes

Several policy initiatives resulted from the work of the LGTW pilot schools and policy team. One of those was a Dear Colleague letter from OSEP clarifying the application of least restrictive environment (LRE) guidelines for transition-aged youth receiving community-based instruction. In other words, LRE should be considered by school districts when providing transition services in the community. The topic was raised by multiple school pilot sites at a consortium meeting the OSEP letter responded to the question being posed by the policy team.

Another of note was the passage of a bill designed to incentivize school districts for fostering positive post-school outcomes. The content of the bill was developed by LGTW project and policy team members because of school pilot sites expressing the need to get school districts to pay attention to their role in the post-school outcomes of students with I/DD. In 2015, State Representative Robert Brooks drafted a pay for performance bill that was eventually passed and funded at the level of \$100,000. In the 2016-17 school year, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction will award "Transition Incentive" grant payments to individual school districts based on special education Indicator 14 criteria. This criterion includes having an individualized education program (IEP) in effect for the individual in the previous school year, the individual is enrolled in a higher education program or other postsecondary education or training within one year of leaving high

school, and the individual had been, or remains, competitively employed within one year of leaving high school. Indicator 14 defines competitive employment as 90 days or more of cumulative or consecutive work paying minimum wage or higher for an average of at least 20 hours per week in a setting with others who do not have disabilities (IDEA, 2004). The bill offers the simultaneous advantages of rewarding districts doing high-quality transition work, and encouraging districts to collect post-school outcomes data annually rather than the approximately every five years as currently required. The Wisconsin state legislature has guaranteed an appropriation for this bill for at least one more year after 2016-17. The LGTW policy team advocated for additional and permanent funding of the Transition Incentive grants.

A third impactful policy initiative that stemmed, at least in part, from LGTW pilot school and policy team input was the creation by the Wisconsin DVR of a Youth on the Job Training (YOJT) service option. Teachers identified the need for students to learn jobs with limited financial risk to employers. Since VR already had the service option of On-the-Job Training (OJT) for adults, VR administrators decided to extend the opportunity to youth. This service option continued in Wisconsin and is now called the Student OJT. The SOJT pays wages, up to 500 hours, for a student during the period just after being hired while the individual is learning the job. This option is attractive to employers as well as youth. It was based on the existing On the Job Training (OJT) program for adults with disabilities that has resulted in permanent employment for 83%–88% of participants. With the new requirements to serve youth under WIOA, DVR has maintained the YOJT initiative statewide and re-named the service Student OJT.

In addition, the policy team members worked with legislators to help get a bill passed to authorize nine permanent business consultant positions through the Department of Workforce Development (DWD), including obtaining co-signers and getting the story into the media to raise awareness. These positions support heightened awareness by businesses that youth with disabilities are an untapped source of needed labor and assist in the connection of job seekers to available jobs.

The policy team also facilitated the development of an electronic sub-minimum wage data collection tool through the Department of Workforce Development. Sub-minimum wage license holders in the state

must now report every six months on each participant, including wages, hours worked and type of work, and data reported must be tied to the statewide market wages for that part of state.

### 2.7. Sustainability

Multiple means of sustainability for project activities were developed. Most pilot school sites have remained committed to employing intervention strategies as demonstrated by involvement in statewide activities such as presenting at conferences, attending transition events and conferences, mentoring other schools, and participating in formal off-shoots of the work (e.g. – an Employment First project, Project SEARCH, Building Meaningful Lives). These projects, along with a competitive, integrated employment workgroup comprised of personnel from all three state agencies that meets monthly, represent commitment to continuation of practice evolution and the goal of improving employment outcomes for youth with I/DD.

As implementation of interventions took place and input from pilot schools was obtained, the project coordinator and coaches began to create a series of stories, videos, tools, and one-page briefs to facilitate educator understanding and implementation of evidence-based and promising transition to employment practices. Named the LGTW Quick Guide by one of the pilot school teachers, this set of supporting materials can be found free of charge on the LGTW website ([letsgettoworkwi.org](http://letsgettoworkwi.org)). The project's policy coordinator was appointed to the Advisory Committee on Increasing Competitive Integrated Employment for Individuals with Disabilities and the President's Committee for People with Disabilities, which allowed the work of all Partnerships in Employment states to be embedded into recommendations put out by these committees.

The statewide Transition Improvement Grant (TIG) through the Department of Public Instruction (WDPI), with regional coordinators across the state, has adopted several of the project's activities, including the provision of coaching, coordination of community conversations, dissemination of Quick Guide materials, use of the TSRS, and demonstration through LGTW videos. TIG regional coordinators work directly in a coaching capacity with local school districts and regularly use the project's video employment stories and LGTW Quick Guide. LGTW staff also participated on the Academic and Career Planning (ACP) Advisory Council through the WDPI,

and a former LGTW project coach now serves on the ACP team, which created an opportunity to embed several of the best practices used by pilot schools.

The Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training and Support (FACETS), the Wisconsin Special Education Parent Education Initiative (WSPEI), and Wisconsin Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) grants are regularly using project materials when working with families and providing trainings. The PROMISE grant, has utilized multiple interventions from LGTW. The PROMISE project coordinator served as the evaluator for LGTW and several other PROMISE staff and consultants were also part of the LGTW project planning team or consortium. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee was asked by DPI to start a transition certification program beginning in the summer of 2015. At the beginning of the project, staff met with the State Superintendent of public education to discuss the need for additional professional development and pre-service teacher training on achieving successful employment outcomes with students who have I/DD.

WI Post-School Outcomes Indicator 14 survey data demonstrate a 10% increase in competitive integrated employment for youth with I/DD between 2010 and 2015. Data from this survey also indicate increases in the percentage of students who are having paid work experiences during high school as well as those who report engagement with VR and adult services. In 2012, a question was added to the state's post-school outcomes survey to seek information about paid work experiences of former students with disabilities. Results for students with I/DD who completed school services in 2010–11 demonstrated that 62% had paid work experience during high school. That figure was up to 77% for 2014–15 exiters surveyed in 2016. In conjunction, 37% of 2010–11 exiters with I/DD reported having engagement with VR and/or adult services when surveyed in 2012, and for 2014–15 exiters, that figure was up to 48%. (Wisconsin Post school Outcomes survey). Since paid work experience and collaboration were both components of the 5C's intervention package, these data points also represent powerful indicators of a degree of sustainability from the LGTW demonstration project. Now, Wisconsin holds the challenge of continued dissemination and implementation, not only to maintain the gains, but continue positive trends.

### 3. Lessons learned

Several lessons learned were identified by pilot school and project staff. Coaching provided to the school sites facilitated positive outcomes achieved. Teachers expressed that they appreciated and needed the on-site assistance to learn the new roles they were being asked to take on. These schools experienced such great success that the model has been expanded to seven other schools. Eight more schools are receiving mentoring using a coaching model and many of the intervention strategies used by LGTW schools. With the implementation of the WIOA, it is anticipated that more youth will be working with DVR earlier, allowing them to experience work sooner, figure out necessary job accommodations, and explore their interests and skills, which better prepares them for the world of work after graduation.

Under the LGTW project, selected schools received a small amount of stipend funding through the grant to engage in the set of activities outlined. Funding started at \$15,000 in the first year of participation for all sites and was decreased in subsequent years to \$9,000 in year two and \$6,000 in year three. The expressed intention of stipend funds was primarily to cover substitute teacher time so that high school special educators and other district personnel could engage in professional development related to employment supports and dedicate time to employer connections and job development. If schools are to receive stipends to engage in evidence-based practices in transition to employment for students with I/DD, LGTW recommends less funding to start and increase funding incrementally over time. LGTW pilot school sites reported that additional funds would have been helpful at the latter stage of the project, after the work was well underway and teachers were better equipped to spend their time collaborating with VR counselors, making employer connections and developing jobs.

Collecting success stories to share with legislators, parents, teachers, employers and the larger community is important. Many times, having a visual of a person with a significant disability was enough to encourage stakeholders to try finding youth employment. These stories are motivating. From an advocacy perspective, sharing successes with legislators was very helpful in finding champions to draft bills because it allowed several of them to become familiar with the project and its outcomes.

Finally, while several sustainability components have been implemented, a challenge remains with

scalability. A key driver to the success in the pilots was the support of leadership in school districts, DVR, long term supports, and other partners. More intentional work to include and engage leadership is necessary.

### 4. Promising practices

Based on the interventions and outcomes described above, five primary promising practices were demonstrated through LGTW project activities. First, coaching, professional development and tools can help facilitate increased understanding and skills for teachers related to implementing practices known to improve employment outcomes for youth with I/DD. Next, access to general education and inclusive extra-curricular activities can also be fostered through intentional training and coaching. Third, success can be accelerated by engaging the broader community and decision-makers in discussions and efforts towards that goal. Fourth, tracking the path of youth to discourage subminimum wage employment supports requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Last, schools, families, VR and long term supports can braid the funding for supports and services offered to youth with I/DD to significantly increase early work experiences, which is a strong predictor of employment in adulthood. LGTW students engaged in unpaid and subsequently paid work experiences at a young age, so they were better prepared to retain competitive integrated jobs once they exited high school.

### Conflict of interest

None to report.

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