



Dialogue Report

May 2019

Policies for Increasing Employment Among Opportunity Youth with Disabilities

INCLUSION OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES IS A NATIONAL PRIORITY

During a time of economic prosperity and historically low unemployment rates in the U.S., too many young people continue to be left behind. This is particularly true for “opportunity youth” with disabilities—those young people ages 16 to 24 who are not working or in school. In 2016, the rate of individuals with disabilities ages 18 to 24 who were neither in school nor working was 34.5% compared to 11.9% of their peers without disabilities (William Erickson, 2010 and 2016). And the dropout rate¹ for 16- to 24-year-olds with disabilities in 2016 (12.4%) was higher than the rate for their peers without disabilities (5.8%), while the completion rate² for 18- to 24-year-olds with disabilities was 83.3% compared to the 93.3% for their peers without disabilities (McFarland, Cui, Rathbun, & Holmes, 2018). In terms of employment, youth with disabilities, ages 16 to 19, had an employment rate of 17.4% in 2018 compared to 31.1% among youth without disabilities in the same age group (U.S. Department

of Labor [USDOL], 2019). This disparity is also prevalent among older young adults, ages 20 to 24, with disabilities who had an employment rate of 37.8% compared to 67.4% among their peers without disabilities (USDOL, 2019). The impacts of ignoring this population are economic and societal.

Specific interventions are needed to close the opportunity and outcome gaps between youth with disabilities and their peers without disabilities, with the understanding that youth with disabilities are not one distinct group. Rather, they comprise the intersection of many identities—including youth with disabilities who are also people of color, Native Americans, and LGBTQ youth. In addition, the type of disability young people have can result in distinct strengths and barriers.

While opportunity youth with disabilities may be outside the school system—in foster care, homeless, or justice involved—they have the

potential to achieve academic and career success with the right levels of engagement and supports. Increasing career success for youth with disabilities means recognizing their many strengths and building on their potential to thrive in our economy. Engaging these youth in leadership roles will ensure their participation in our communities to lead the country forward.

POSITIONING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES FOR CAREER SUCCESS

In December 2018, the [National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth \(NCWD/Youth\)](#), housed at the [Institute for Educational Leadership \(IEL\)](#), and the [National Youth Employment Coalition \(NYEC\)](#) hosted a dialogue with young leaders, employers, policymakers, educators, and administrators to generate a set of priorities and strategies to ensure opportunity youth with disabilities are well-positioned for career success. The dialogue was supported in part by the [U.S.](#)

[Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy](#). This discussion resulted in the development of an Inclusion Priority Framework that outlines four major priorities and corresponding strategies.

The Inclusion Priority Framework points to the greatest challenge and corresponding solution to success for opportunity youth with disabilities—full inclusion. Full inclusion is often hampered by issues and policies related to self-disclosure, technology, transportation, limited information about and access to opportunities, and supports for youth as well as employers. Fully inclusive practices and policies require a new way of looking at disability—as an important asset in diversifying our workforce and leading to creative solutions in schools and business communities. This challenge is not only clear, it is solvable. Policymakers have a distinctive role to incentivize, mobilize, and stimulate solutions that ensure progress toward the goal of full inclusion for opportunity youth with disabilities.

BARRIERS TO FULL INCLUSION



INCLUSION PRIORITY FRAMEWORK

PRIORITY #1: Shift the education paradigm to ensure that youth with disabilities are fully included, supported, and prepared for success.

- Promote policies that ensure young people with disabilities receive a well-rounded education that includes career exposure and training as well as financial literacy and employability skills training.
- Establish and implement policies that integrate students with disabilities into classroom and work-based learning experiences alongside students without disabilities and collect data on their participation and outcomes.
- Incentivize and fund the creation of more inclusive work-based learning opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, and job shadowing to help all youth explore and prepare for careers.
- Support policies that create and strengthen re-engagement options for youth with disabilities who drop out to assist them with earning a high school credential and obtaining postsecondary education, training, and employment.

PRIORITY #2: Mobilize youth leaders by bringing them into the design, development, and decision-making process at the early stages of any new policy, practice, or initiative.

- Collaborate with existing groups such as Opportunity Youth United's³ National Council of Young Leaders and establish youth-driven cabinets at the state and national levels to help design and implement new ideas.
- Provide training to youth and their families on their rights and legislative policies impacting their schools, career opportunities, and communities and how to advocate for what they need.
- Support youth and their families as they navigate the varied systems (educational, health/human services, and employment) that impact their lives, especially linguistically and culturally diverse families.
- Leverage technological advances to increase youth and family engagement in policy conversations.
- Encourage and support youth in becoming entrepreneurs and business leaders who have the resources and authority to create ideal working environments.



PRIORITY #3: Promote and reward inclusive workplace practices and culture to maximize the potential of every young employee with a disability.

- Continue support for and adoption of state-level Employment First⁴ principles aimed at aligning policies, service delivery models, and reimbursement structures to ensure competitive integrated employment for youth and adults (Whitehouse, Ingram, & Silverstein, 2016).
- Train business leaders on how to create an environment where disclosure is encouraged and supported.
- Facilitate conversations with business leaders to discuss, inform, and support their hiring/job application, training, and retention practices, including examples from successful companies.
- Communicate effectively to all employers about available incentives for hiring workers with disabilities and how they can benefit their bottom line.
- Share data with business and industry on the value-added of employees with disabilities, including lower employee turnover, higher brand loyalty, and the market for products and services for people with disabilities.

PRIORITY #4: Create public and private policies that contribute to full inclusion and success at the local, tribal, state, and national levels.

- Create publicly and/or privately funded challenge programs that incentivize creative solutions to accessibility barriers in workplaces, schools, and the broader community.
- Promote full inclusion in educational institutions and workplaces by identifying central components for future learning and workforce environments that are designed, developed, and implemented for all people with disabilities.
- Build transportation options that are affordable, accessible, and feasible for people with different disabilities.
- Incentivize the building industry to partner with communities to create housing that is affordable, accessible, and aesthetically pleasing and to engage youth and their families in resulting job training and development opportunities.
- Ensure that regulations require accessible programming and physical accommodations in correctional facilities and public service agencies.



CALL TO ACTION: WORKING TOGETHER FOR FULL INCLUSION

Disability is not a barrier to be overcome, but a strength to be leveraged in a society that continues to evolve, grow, and lead. We must work together as a society to reach the vision of full inclusion in education, employment, and community by taking action to ensure that people with all types and levels of ability are learning, working, and living together. As the United States continues to advance its economic strength, and states search for creative ways to fill jobs and inspire new industry growth, everyone benefits from preparing, supporting, and mobilizing opportunity youth with disabilities to fully participate in all aspects of school, work, and community.

The time for action is now because our country cannot afford to leave any young people with disabilities behind. Federal policies and proposed legislation have created a conducive environment for change at the federal level, including the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) as well as the Transformation to Competitive Employment Bill (H.R. 873 and S. 260) (Center for Public Representation, 2019). The latter proposed legislation would phase out sub-minimum wages for individuals with a disability and provide additional funding to states and providers to expand competitive integrated employment if passed.

Realizing the need to fully engage everyone in order to strengthen their operations, employers such as CVS Health and Starbucks are taking the initiative to create career

Voices of Youth

“Peckham’s Right Turn Program... they help me a lot, and they gave me a mentor...(we) discussed how I could successfully, and long-term, work at a job. I’ve also had family members who have come and talk to me and given me tips on different jobs that I’ve done...just to have them be able to give me the tips that I needed prior to going into jobs. It’s taken a lot off because I had some idea of what to expect when I’ve entered.”

— ELIYAHOT

“...to motivate someone...give them a feel or a touch of the experience of...being in that job. Because anybody can tell you...about the job; but once you take it, it’s not how they explained it.”

— DOMINIC

“When I was little, I’d go to my school and none of my teachers believed in me. Then I went to River Terrace...and my teacher...said, you can do anything you want to do....I was like, wow, a teacher never said that to me before.”

— JEANELL



opportunities that seamlessly employ young people with disabilities alongside young people without disabilities.

National advocacy groups that represent the interests of opportunity youth such as the National Council of Young Leaders and the National Youth Employment Coalition are developing new ways to connect opportunity youth to the labor force.

Policy decisions about strategies to achieve full inclusion must involve opportunity youth with disabilities and employers, as well as other stakeholders such as professionals who work with opportunity youth with disabilities. The first step to engaging youth and other critical partners is asking the right questions and listening carefully to determine what matters, what is needed, and what works to achieve the desired outcomes from their perspectives. Policymakers can use the following questions to start conversations that lead to developing solutions together:

QUESTIONS TO ASK		
Youth With Disabilities	Employers⁵	Youth Service Providers
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are your current career and life aspirations? 2. What are the challenges you face to employment and career success? 3. What solutions do you suggest? 4. How would you describe the ideal learning and workplace environment? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What supports do you need to create a fully inclusive environment? 2. What strategies have you or could you use to create buy-in for this work? 3. What advice would you give to other employers to improve recruitment, hiring, and retention of youth with disabilities? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In your work, what practices are most promising for positioning opportunity youth with disabilities for career success? 2. How do you bring the right stakeholders to the table? 3. What are the resources you need to make these efforts succeed?



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Endnotes

¹ The status dropout rate reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in school (public or private) and have not earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential.

² The status completion rate measures the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not currently enrolled in high school and who have earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential, regardless of when or where the credential was earned.

³ [Opportunity Youth United](#) is a “solutions-oriented movement of young adults who have experienced poverty and are dedicated to creating a society with opportunity and responsibility, love and respect, education and employment, and justice and equality for all” (Schultz Family Foundation, n.d.).

⁴ [Employment First](#) is a “national movement that calls for systems change that is centered on the premise that all citizens, including individuals with significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in integrated employment and community life” (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

⁵ To learn more about steps employers can take to spark dialogue around inclusion, visit the Employer Assistance and Resource Network’s (EARN) Inclusion@Work Framework and resources on Disability Inclusion: <http://www.askearn.org/training-center/inclusionwork-trainings-webinars>



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