

## Understanding the New Vision for Career Development: The Role of Family

The world of work has changed. A high school diploma alone no longer guarantees a decent living wage. A typical career path today does not necessarily follow the traditional course of high school, college, and long-term employment. Rather, according to the most recent available data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average worker today stays at each of his or her jobs for 4.4 years, with the workforce's youngest employees staying less than 3 years. That means that they will have 15 to 20 jobs over their working lives. One reality of today's workforce, however, that has remained the same is that youth need to develop skills to be employed. To be able to acquire these skills and effectively change jobs, and plan and manage multiple careers over one's life time, career development skills are important. The process by which youth get to know their strengths and interests, learn how different jobs connect with those interests, and build these career planning and management skills is called career development.

By helping to support youth in making important informed decisions about their future, parents and other caring adults can contribute a great

deal to their children's post-high school success. For youth with disabilities in particular, families often play the very important roles of setting high expectations for youth's future employment, and of advocating for opportunities for them to identify their strengths and interests and to explore career options. Families who learn about and begin the career development process with their youth early will be better prepared to support them in choosing and building a bright

future. "Family" here is defined broadly as adults and children related biologically, emotionally, or legally, including single parents, blended families, unrelated individuals living cooperatively, and partnered couples who live with biological, adopted, and foster children.

*This Info Brief introduces families, including families of youth with disabilities, to a new way of looking at career development for youth. This brief discusses the three phases of career development, highlights Individualized Learning Plans as a tool for facilitating the career development process, and offers strategies on how families can be involved.*

It is important that families begin the discussion with the youth about choosing a career long before high school graduation. To facilitate this conversation and make it more productive, this brief provides information for families about the three phases of career development: self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management.

## Understanding “Career Development”

Just as the world of work is constantly changing, so is the process of work preparation. In the past, people assumed that when youth graduated from high school, they would have all the basic skills necessary to move on to postsecondary education or work. Some students were passive participants in this process, and families generally assumed that the secondary education system was adequately preparing youth for college or to go directly into employment.

For youth with disabilities at that time, career development opportunities were bleak. Many were limited by society’s low expectations of them and the general belief that people with disabilities did not have the capability or skills to work towards a challenging career in a field of their choice. Instead of basing the career development process on the students’ interests and skills, for youth with disabilities, as with many other minority youth, career development was

likely to have been focused around stereotypical assumptions of what the individual could and could not do with an emphasis on mediating against perceived deficits, rather than building on the student’s strengths. Career development for many youth with disabilities may have been limited to transitioning to adult services or to employment at a sheltered workshop, which paid below-minimum wages. Neither of these outcomes maximized independence or included opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Today, career development can empower all youth, including those with disabilities, to take an active role in shaping their futures, especially with the support of their families throughout this process. By engaging in a three-phased set of personalized career development activities, driven through an Individualized Learning Plan (ILP), youth can identify and align their interests, skills, and values with educational and skill-building opportunities to ultimately become career-ready.

### Career Development Phases



### Phase 1: Self-exploration

“Who am I?” This basic question can serve as the first building block to youth finding a career path. Before youth can identify their own career goals, they need to find out about their interests, strengths, and values. This self-awareness can help guide youth throughout their lifetime of exploring options and being successful on the job.

Structured experiences outside of school can be powerful for a student embarking on the self-exploration phase. Consider Jermaine’s story:

*Jermaine is a young man with a significant learning disability. Jermaine’s parents have always made sure Jermaine had a broad range*

of life experiences. They visited museums and other important places in the community and encouraged him to volunteer with them at the local food bank. In 9th grade, Jermaine began to take career interest and self-assessment tests and learned that helping others is very important to him. He discovered his strengths in organization and logistics and his passion for travel. As a result of his experiences with his family and his early awareness of his strengths, Jermaine identified working with food relief programs as a career goal. He now focuses many of his high school course choices on information technology, social studies, and math. Jermaine is excited about high school because he is working toward an attainable goal that he chose.

Self-exploration is crucial because it allows students to discover who they are, what they like to do, and what they need to do to reach their goals. Many young people have frustrating experiences in high school because they don't see how the coursework relates to their goals. If students have opportunities to explore and identify their specific interests, strengths, and values, they are better prepared to construct meaningful life goals. Having meaningful goals in place promotes student engagement in their education, and high school coursework takes on new meaning and importance for them.

Families have a significant role to play in providing students with quality self-exploration opportunities. They can provide a variety of activities outside of school, as Jermaine's parents did, that help youth shape an understanding of who they are and what they are passionate about. Families can also encourage youth to take advantage of personal and career interest activities while in school and help them understand the value of being involved in extracurricular activities and special interest

clubs. Establishing this interest base will help youth channel their passion towards a goal, realize their goal is attainable, and motivate themselves to work hard towards it. If a youth has a disability, families can help advocate for enhanced self-exploration opportunities and make sure those are reflected in the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

***“The evidence indicates that students who become more competent in self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management are more motivated to attend school, become confident learners, actively set goals, and record better grades.”***

Promoting Quality Individualized Learning Plans: A “How-to Guide” (2012)

Self-exploration activities can include

- taking career interest assessments;
- taking personal interest assessments;
- identifying the student's learning style;
- identifying the student's communication style;
- exploring how others see the student;
- learning about the goal-setting process;
- identifying strengths; and
- visiting museums, theatres, or community landmarks.

*For more information on self-exploration activities, see “Promoting Quality Individualized Learning Plans: A “How-to Guide” referenced in the Resources section of this brief.*



## Phase 2: Career Exploration

Youth often have limited exposure to the kinds of jobs that are available. They may observe what their parents, relatives, and people in their immediate social circle do and choose a similar path, but this method usually offers a narrow view of all possible options. Through career exploration, youth can learn more about the full range of jobs that may match their interests, strengths, and values.

Career exploration gives youth the opportunity to identify personal career and life goals that align with who they are as individuals. If self-exploration answers the question, “Who am I?”, then career exploration helps answer, “Based on who I am, what are some good career options to explore?”

Career exploration is an essential piece of the career development process. Often, youth may be able to list careers they are interested in, but can rarely identify what education or skills they would need to work in that field. That’s why career exploration activities should involve experiences in the school and community that help young people to

1. identify how their interests, strengths, and values relate to careers of interest;
2. describe the skills and activities associated with those careers; and
3. identify the training and educational re-

quirements needed to successfully pursue those careers.

Consider Mai’s story:

*Mai is a high school junior who is on the autism spectrum. Through the self-exploration process, she became interested in pursuing a career in the hospitality industry, specifically event planning. She soon realized that she had little idea of what an event planner does or what type of education and experience is needed to become one. After researching the job during her career readiness class at school, Mai can now describe what skills and education are necessary to pursue her choice of career. Her family recognized the need for Mai to experience the job firsthand, so they helped arrange for her to “shadow” a hotel event planner. Her family also requested an activity where she planned her own mock corporate event as part of a school project. After these experiences, Mai found a*



*These youth in Peckham’s career-focused Ready to Achieve Mentoring Program are interested in health care careers. They are learning about opportunities in the field through a career exploration scavenger hunt.*

*local community college that offers a degree in hospitality, and she plans to enroll there after she graduates from high school.*

Some common career exploration activities include

- informational interviews with employers;
- career-related guest speakers;
- workplace visits and tours;

- job shadowing;
- career fairs and career days;
- career camps;
- hands-on career projects; and
- career-focused mentoring.

As with self-exploration, families have an important role to play in advocating and supporting quality career exploration for their youth. Families can support career exploration in several ways:

- Communicate the expectation that their youth will become employed. Youth are more likely to be motivated to explore possible careers if their families have high expectations that they will be successful.
- Learn about career preparation activities offered in school, how student progress is evaluated, and how this information is shared with the family.
- Help support their son or daughter in exploring a wide range of career options by visiting businesses in the community, job shadowing, speaking to family and friends, or bringing him or her to visit their own place of employment.
- Investigate quality websites that offer a range of tools that help youth learn about jobs.
- Encourage youth to not only explore interesting careers, including those they may not have previously considered, but also to learn about the education and skills required for those careers.
- Use connections from social and professional networks to help identify real world opportunities for youth to explore careers.
- For youth receiving special education services, make sure the IEP contains meaningful, measurable activities around career exploration. Help youth create a long-term transition goal that reflects their intent to be employed in a particular field or to pursue postsecondary education related to their chosen career.
- Look for opportunities to introduce youth to adults with jobs that are in their field of interest or in the range of their own experience. For example, a youth with a disability may be motivated by observing an adult with a disability in the workplace.

*For more information, see the “Career Exploration in Action” brief referenced in the Resources section of this brief.*

## Phase 3: Career Planning and Management

Career planning and management involves developing employability and decision-making skills and increasing the youth’s capacity to navigate within the world of work, not just in the short term but also throughout their lives. Youth often struggle in employment because they do not have the skills to easily manage the basic day-to-day expectations of employers, or the awareness that in a rapidly changing job market, people need to adapt quickly to be successful. Career planning and management involves developing the skills needed to maintain employability throughout the lifespan.

When a youth has found a career or careers he or she is interested in pursuing, career planning and management helps answer the question, “What do I need to do now to make my goal a reality?”

Career planning and management activities support students by helping them

1. acquire job search skills;
2. build career readiness skills; and
3. develop traits, work habits, and behaviors that allow them to be effective in the work place, and to continually seek new work opportunities, therefore maximizing employability.

Activities for helping youth develop career planning and management skills can be organized into five areas. Families can use this list to determine if their son or daughter is receiving quality opportunities to build skills in these key areas:

1. **Job search skills:** Obtaining employment often requires youth to plan, practice, and follow the standard job seeking process. These skills include writing resumes and cover letters, searching for job openings, and developing interview techniques. Using social, academic, and professional networks are additional ways youth can find opportunities and research companies of interest. Youth with disabilities also need to understand how and when to disclose a disability to an employer. The services available to youth with disabilities, such as vocational rehabilitation, or to youth generally, such as the Department of Labor's youth programs, can be a particular asset in the job search process. Youth with disabilities use the services to practice interviewing, learning about professional dress, and getting connected to other resources they need to get a job.
2. **Youth development and leadership:** Youth development, the process of growing

up and developing one's skills, happens no matter what we do. The challenge for families and other caring adults is to promote positive youth development and plan quality experiences with young people. Positive youth development engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a way that recognizes, uses, and improves youths' strengths. Such experiences ultimately lead to purposeful, confident goal setting that prepares the youth to meet the challenges of adulthood, which can often include making difficult decisions about one's career. Positive youth development experiences lay the groundwork for positive long-term outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, building relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership skills. Youth leadership can take place through formal programs, informal participation in school clubs and activities, or community involvement. With these activities, youth with disabilities may have the opportunity to practice self-advocacy skills that can be critical to their success in the workplace in activities such as requesting accommodations, determining job tasks, and negotiating promotions.

3. **Soft Skills:** Success in the workplace often entails being able to adhere to certain social and interpersonal rules. Most employees navigate these workplace rules by using soft skills – communication, teamwork, problem solving, networking, enthusiasm, and professionalism. Youth who lack soft skills may struggle with getting along with co-workers, taking direction from others, showing up to work on time, or maintaining an appropriate appearance. Youth need to understand the important role of soft skills and be given opportunities

to build skills in communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.

**4. Work-based learning:** Interest in employment or in specific careers needs to be cultivated by exposing youth to actual work experiences. These opportunities may include career awareness activities or field trips in elementary or middle school. In high school, work-based learning experiences should become more in-depth, offering youth opportunities for internships or school-based entrepreneurial projects. Paid work experiences are particularly important as research shows that the strongest indicator of future adult employment is paid work experience in high school. Youth with disabilities can also use this time to explore vocational rehabilitation as a possible work-related support or supported employment. They also need to consider what, if any, job accommodations they may need. Students who engage in work-based learning have a deeper understanding about careers and are able to set goals based on their interests and real world experiences.

**5. Financial Literacy:** Students should determine how much money they need to earn to be self-sufficient and also learn how to develop their financial goals. Financial literacy skills can also set the stage for a lifetime of responsible money management.

The graphic on Page 8 illustrates the types of work-based learning experiences youth can participate in.

Career planning and management skills greatly helped Perry:

*Perry is a high school senior who experienced a traumatic brain injury as a child. Perry does not*

*require special education services, but he has a 504 Plan that provides him with reasonable accommodations during tests. Perry has long been focused on pursuing a career in teaching. He has good grades but his family is concerned that he lacks the work habits and soft skills needed for a career. Perry took a job skills class as an elective. His family helped him access a job search support group and acquire a summer internship through the local American Job Center ([www.jobcenter.usa.gov](http://www.jobcenter.usa.gov)). He also explored possible job accommodations by visiting the Job*

### Benefits of Family Involvement in Career Development

Parents play an important role in their youth's career development, and the impact of that involvement can be significant. According to research commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, students whose parents are involved in their career exploration and planning are more actively engaged in school, more open to change, and resilient when facing challenges (Solberg & Gresham, forthcoming).

The research also suggests that family involvement in career planning results in higher

- career search confidence and advocacy;
- academic confidence and advocacy;
- connection with peers;
- management of academic stress;
- management of distress;
- academic motivation; and
- interpersonal connection with teachers.



## Work-Based Learning Experiences

<b>Tours</b>	Students take part in employer-led tours of sites which provides students with information on requirements of different jobs.
<b>Job Shadowing</b>	Students make brief worksite visits to spend time with individual workers to learn what their jobs entail.
<b>Rotations</b>	Students work in a number of different departments or for different employers to explore different occupations within an industry cluster.
<b>Mentoring</b>	Students are paired with “adult peers” from the workplace who provide guidance and encouragement on career-related, interdisciplinary projects.
<b>Entrepreneurship</b>	Students create an alternate work program, are their own boss, earn money, create a project, run their business, and earn high school credit.
<b>Service Learning</b>	Students participate in unpaid work, geared to the public good, integrated with school learning through projects or similar mechanisms.
<b>Internships/ Co-Op</b>	Students participate in paid work experience with employer, school coordinator and student agreeing to follow training plan. Students take vocational and work related classes at school.
<b>Youth Apprenticeship</b>	The integration of academic instruction and work-based learning. The student commits to one or two years of paid work experience in a specific trade and is registered as a youth apprentice.

*Graphic used with permission from the Minnesota Department of Education.*

*Accommodation Network website ([www.askjan.org](http://www.askjan.org)). These experiences helped Perry realize that it was his responsibility to work hard and understand what was expected of him as an employee. He learned the steps to take for a successful job search, and he understands the importance of keeping his skills up to date. He has even begun to create a plan for future education and training that will help him move up the career ladder. Today, Perry feels confident that he is ready to be successful in his first job.*

Families can help youth make the connection between identifying career interests and preparing for a career in that area of interest. By thinking back and recalling key experiences

and influences in their own career development, motivation, and preparation, families may spark ideas for a young person who is facing a similar situation. To assist youth in the career planning and management phase families can do the following:

- Investigate community programs and school activities that provide youth with opportunities to obtain hands-on work experience and practice soft skills.
- Find out if their son or daughter’s school offers access to a career information system and whether the youth is engaged in Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) activities.



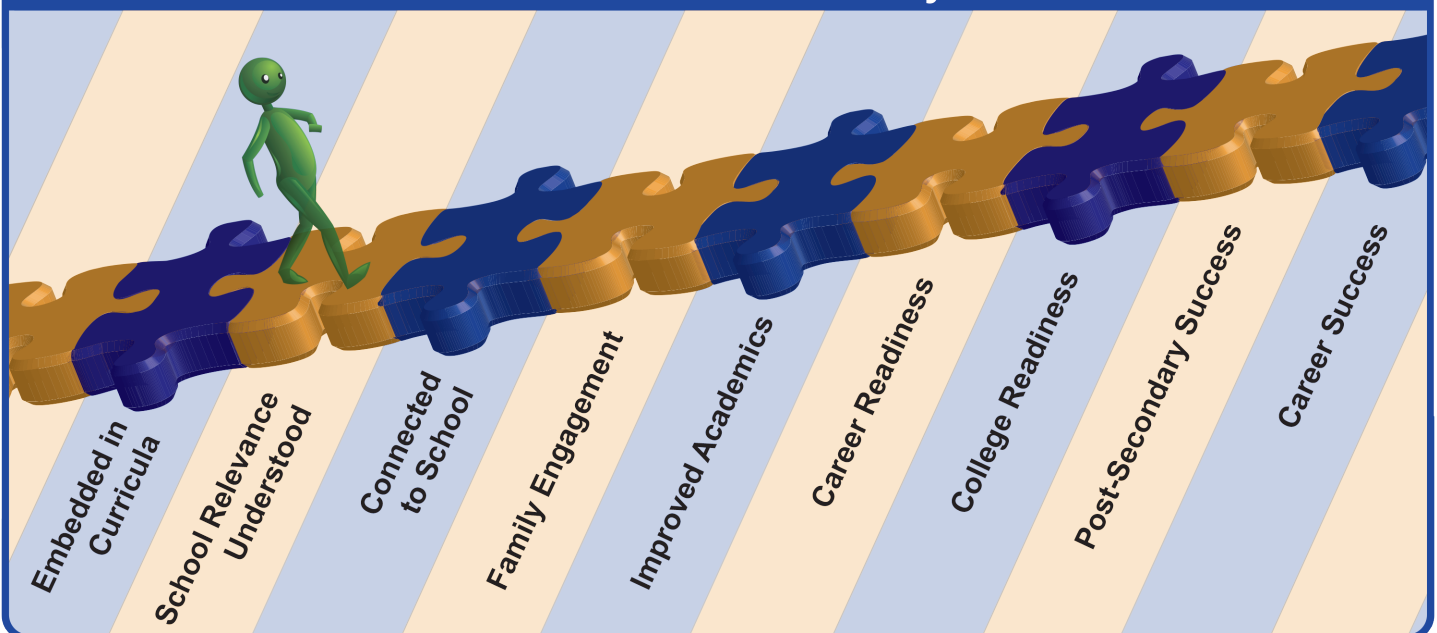
These systems contain an electronic portfolio for documenting youth career readiness activities, skills, and accomplishments. Alternatively, online resume and portfolio systems, such as LinkedIn, can also allow users to document their skills, accomplishments, and certifications/credentials.

- Use common activities in the home, like making dinner, grocery shopping, or doing chores to build work skills and soft skills (*see Resources section for NCWD/Youth Info Briefs for tips*).
- Have discussions with their son or daughter about work ethic and on-the-job expectations. Reinforce these conversations by holding high expectations for school work and behavior at home.
- Assist their youth with a disability in exploring employment supports. These options may include Vocational Rehabilitation, community providers of supported employment and independent living, and the local American Jobs Center (<http://jobcenter.usa.gov/>).
- Help youth with disabilities understand the impact of employment opportunities on their benefits, such as Social Security and Medicaid benefits.
- Help their youth draft a resume listing job skills, paid and unpaid work experiences, and a strong rationale for wanting to work in a certain industry.
- For youth with disabilities, participate in the development of the Summary of Performance (SOP) within their son or daughter's IEP. Make sure the school has documented career and work-based learning experiences, as well as recommendations for support needs beyond high school.

## Individualized Learning Plans: Lending Structure to the Process

Career development for youth often takes place in informal ways. Career development activities are not often documented and tracked consistently like a youth's academic activities are

### The Path from ILPs to Post-Secondary & Career Success



through course selection and report cards. Youth in general education may have built skills to meet certain career requirements, but they may not have known if their efforts matched real world expectations. For youth in special education, career development may have appeared as “activities” in their IEP, but their IEP may not have emphasized developing the connection to the workplace or specific careers, or emphasized the development of skills needed for lifelong career opportunities. Fortunately, Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) now provide students with a new way to direct and track their career development.

ILPs accomplish three things. First, they help youth identify career and life goals. Second, they help youth identify the courses they need to complete in high school as well as the out-of-school and work-based learning opportunities they need to pursue their goals. Third, they help youth carefully evaluate and decide on postsecondary training or education programs they may wish to pursue in order to successfully reach their career and life goals.

To date, 37 states and the District of Columbia use some form of an Individualized Learning Plan for students, although they may not use the term ILP. For example, Connecticut has a “Student Success Plan,” Oregon has an “Education Plan and Profile,” and Missouri uses a “Personal Plan of Study.” Parents are strongly encouraged to ask their school if ILPs are currently being used and how the plan information is shared with families. ILPs can begin as early as middle school along

with appropriate career and self-exploration activities.

Students in special education who have an IEP will benefit tremendously by engaging in ILPs. One of the challenges to supporting youth with disabilities is helping them and their family to feel confident enough to advocate for the types of learning opportunities and accommodations needed to prepare them for post-school transitions. The ILP helps youth and their family identify career and life goals, which prepares them to more effectively guide the transition planning



session during the IEP meeting to focus on the youth’s interests and goals. States that mandate ILPs are often adding clarifying language to ensure that youth with disabilities are included in ILP activities and that the information from the ILP shapes transition planning during the IEP.

Olivia is using her ILP to help prepare for a career:

*Olivia is a high school junior with a moderate intellectual disability and other health concerns. She receives special education services in school. Aside from her IEP, Olivia also has a “Graduation Plan” or ILP like the other students in her grade. Olivia’s parents have been talking to her about her employment goals since she was young, and she thinks a job working with medical records would be interesting. Stating this goal on her ILP has allowed Olivia to be thoughtful about choosing which classes to take in high school and has helped her identify the skills she needs to work in that field. Olivia has documented her*

*school experiences such as choir and student council on her ILP along with relevant career exploration activities. Her IEP includes goals and activities that will help her build specific skills, strengthen her academic performance, and identify potential supports that would be helpful in the community. Olivia is excited that her senior year will be filled with activities such as job shadowing and classes that will allow her to enroll in a post-secondary program for medical record-keeping. Olivia now understands the link between her education and her long-term goals, and she appreciates having an ILP to serve as her road map.*

*For more information on how ILPs can help students, and a list of states currently using ILPs, please visit [www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp).*

## Conclusion

Today's youth face a challenge in preparing for an ever-changing world of work. For youth to find a career path that interests and motivates them, they should first engage in the three phases of career development: self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management. Families who make career development a high priority will help ensure their son or daughter is adequately prepared to pursue his or her postsecondary and employment goal immediately after high school graduation and continuing throughout adulthood. Families should also find out if their school is using Individualized Learning Plans, which can assist all youth in career development starting as early as middle school. Because ILPs identify career and life goals, they can help youth with disabilities and their families in developing their IEP transition plans. In addition, they can help ensure that high school coursework and activities are truly meeting their intended purpose of preparing all youth to be college and career ready.

## Resources

### **PACER Center**

[www.pacer.org](http://www.pacer.org)

### **Promoting Quality Individualized Learning Plans: A "How-to Guide" Focused on the High School Years**

[www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp/how-to-guide](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp/how-to-guide)

### **Using Career Interest Inventories to Inform Career Planning**

[www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative-strategies/practice-briefs/using-career-interest-inventories-to-inform-career-planning](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative-strategies/practice-briefs/using-career-interest-inventories-to-inform-career-planning)

### **Career Exploration in Action**

[www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative-strategies/practice-briefs/career-exploration-in-action](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative-strategies/practice-briefs/career-exploration-in-action)

### **Engaging Youth in Work Experiences**

[www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative-strategies/practice-briefs/engaging-youth-in-work-experiences](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative-strategies/practice-briefs/engaging-youth-in-work-experiences)

### **Helping Youth Build Work Skills for Job Success: Tips for Parents and Families**

[www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-34](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-34)

### **Helping Youth Develop Soft Skills for Job Success: Tips for Parents and Families**

[www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-28](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-28)

***Families who make career development a high priority will help ensure their son or daughter is adequately prepared to pursue his or her postsecondary and employment goal immediately after high school graduation and continuing throughout adulthood.***



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The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. NCWD/Youth is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate



youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Policy Brief was written by the PACER

Center. To obtain this publication in an alternate format please contact the Collaborative at 877-871-0744 toll free or email [contact@ncwd-youth.info](mailto:contact@ncwd-youth.info). This Policy Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by the NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at [www.ncwd-youth.info](http://www.ncwd-youth.info). Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications. This document was developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy

(Number #OD-23804-12-75-4-11). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor. Individuals may produce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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