

Unlocking the Potential of WIOA Title I

An Opportunity for Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities

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Introduction

The [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#) is landmark legislation designed to strengthen and improve our nation's public workforce system and help Americans, including youth and others with significant barriers to employment, gain high-quality jobs and careers.

Congress established common performance measures across workforce systems to assess the ongoing outcomes achieved under WIOA. These measures include employment rates — second and fourth quarters after exit; median earnings second quarter after exit; credential attainment; measurable skill gains; and effectiveness in serving employers. While some progress is evident in these measures, a gap exists in the performance of systems serving youth and young adults with disabilities (Y&YAD) in comparison to the services received by all Title I Youth (see Table 1). Like their adult counterparts, Y&YAD continue to be outpaced in all key performance measures except for measurable skill gains when compared to Title I Youth overall (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). Since Y&YAD represent 19.5 percent of those served under Title I (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022), and nearly 7 percent of the total population of youth ages 16-20 (Erickson et al., 2022), there is an urgent need to leverage key aspects of Title I programming to address these disparities.



Table 1 (U.S. DOL, 2022)

Common Performance Measures	All Title I Youth	Title I Youth w/Disabilities
Employment and Education Rate Second Quarter After Exit	73.1%	70.3%
Employment and Education Rate Fourth Quarter After Exit	70.9%	67.7%
Median Earnings Second Quarter After Exit	\$4,235	\$3,950
Credential Attainment Rate	60.0%	57.6%
Measurable Skill Gains	54.7%	56.0%

WIOA has the potential to advance [competitive integrated employment](#) and economic self-sufficiency of Y&YAD, but a reliance on a medical model of disability, like a deficit-based approach, limits access and expectations for Y&YAD (Cunningham, 2022). In addition, the local structure of WIOA Title I programs creates challenges for understanding equitable access and participation in these programs (Palmer et al., 2021). While metrics exist to measure who is accessing certain programs, administrators could benefit from an assessment of the barriers experienced by youth in accessing them. An assessment would allow states to better understand the level of equity achieved for Y&YAD, including those from marginalized populations, when accessing WIOA funded programs such as youth programs, Job Corps and YouthBuild. Through a comprehensive analysis of administrative data, policymakers could identify variances in enrollment, receipt of services and achievement of outcomes (Palmer et al., 2021). By investing in meaningful improvement and evaluation processes including improvement science, root cause analysis and scaling from pilot level successes, states can equip programs and services to better serve Y&YAD in the workforce development system (Bryk et al., 2017). By implementing cycles of improvement, including deep inquiry into the source or sources of issues, state and local level workforce development areas can better inform policymakers about emerging and real needs to facilitate the alignment of new policy development that will enhance practice.





Background

Title I of WIOA, administered by the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) [Employment and Training Administration \(ETA\)](#), provides formula funding to states through the [youth](#), adult and dislocated worker grant programs to support employment training and other related services to unemployed and underemployed individuals. The WIOA Youth Formula Program, which includes 14 required program elements, provides opportunities to meet the career and employment needs of [out-of-school](#) and [in-school](#) youth ages 14-24 with one or more barriers to employment through the provision of comprehensive youth services. The program prioritizes service delivery to out-of-school youth by requiring that a minimum of 75 percent of WIOA youth funding be spent on this group. In addition to the WIOA Youth Program, Title I of WIOA also funds [Job Corps](#) and [YouthBuild](#). Collectively, in 2022, the DOL allocated \$2.8 billion to support the WIOA Youth Program, Job Corps and YouthBuild (CRS, 2022).

While a portion of these funds is intended to serve youth and young adults with disabilities in preparing for and attaining employment,

postsecondary education and educational and skill credentials, WIOA also requires serving youth with [intersecting and marginalized identities who face barriers to education, training and employment](#) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). For example, 85 percent of youth served under Title I are eligible to receive services based on income status alone (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). WIOA also prioritizes serving youth experiencing homelessness; youth who are in the foster care system or who have aged out; youth who are in an out-of-home placement; youth who are low-income and require additional assistance to enter or complete an educational program or to secure or hold employment; youth in economic need; youth who are either basic skills deficient or an English language learner; and others (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Y&YAD are overrepresented in each of these other prioritized populations.



Promising Strategies to Support Y&YAD through WIOA Title I

Some Y&YAD may not receive the full services available under WIOA due to the presence of non-apparent disabilities, a hesitancy to disclose or because they are immediately referred to WIOA Title IV vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies for services. State policymakers can use the information contained in this brief to enhance their states' efforts in implementing WIOA Title I programs and services to better serve Y&YAD by:

- 1 | Leverage other federal initiatives across state workforce agencies to initiate innovation at the local level.**
- 2 | Enhance collaboration among state and local workforce, education and non-traditional WIOA partners to prioritize Y&YAD.**
- 3 | Build specific blended service approaches with VR agencies to enhance access to services for Y&YAD.**
- 4 | Support inclusive approaches in programs like Job Corps or YouthBuild to expand access to Y&YAD.**

Once identified, states can address systemic challenges by considering several potential policy and program levers including:

1 | Leverage other federal initiatives across state workforce agencies to drive innovation at the local level.

There are numerous pilot and demonstration projects funded by the [U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy](#) (ODEP), [Social Security Administration, Rehabilitation Services Administration](#) and others to test innovative strategies to support Y&YAD in achieving competitive integrated employment. For example, from 2010 to 2017, ODEP collaborated with DOL's ETA to fund the Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) across the country to test structural and programmatic innovations to advance employment. Integrated resource teams (IRT) are one example of a model developed using these funds. An IRT is "an informal, customer-centered partnership between an individual jobseeker with a disability and diverse service systems" with the goal of coordinating services and leveraging funding to offer the jobseeker a series of comprehensive wraparound services to meet their employment goals (Project E3, 2021).





Through the [NextGen Careers project](#) funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration's [Disability Innovation Fund](#), the [Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission](#) (MRC) is using the IRT model to specifically engage individuals between 18-30 who have not typically accessed the VR or workforce development system. Through NextGen Careers, MRC is leveraging a strong partnership with MassHire Career Centers and Workforce Boards to provide 1,000 individuals with disabilities access to workforce development training programs.

Additionally, some states and local workforce development areas expanded services to Y&YAD through previous DEI projects funded by ODEP and ETA. For instance, the Hempstead Works office in New York has maintained and expanded mentoring, IRTs and career pathway initiatives first developed under DEI. The cross-systems approach of IRTs seen in Massachusetts and New York is one that other states can replicate to foster strong career pathways for Y&YAD.

2 | Enhance collaboration among state and local workforce, education and nontraditional WIOA partners to prioritize Y&YAD.

WIOA provides a unique opportunity and expectation for professionals to collaborate in the design and delivery of program models spanning across systems. There is ongoing evidence of the power of work-based learning experiences in the lives of Y&YAD to enhance post-school employment outcomes. State workforce programs, along with their WIOA partners and other nontraditional partners, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, juvenile

justice, foster care, homeless shelters and others, have a unique opportunity to lead collaborations to build employment opportunities for Y&YAD. A [2020 report](#) (Dunham et al., 2020) on the implementation of WIOA in serving youth, identified recruitment of out-of-school youth as a challenge for local workforce development areas. Building community partnerships between workforce systems and organizations serving out-of-school youth can support the state in reaching their WIOA Title I goals and offer a broader population of Y&YAs access to timely services during transition.

A strong example of building collaborations to serve specific populations of out-of-school youth is the [Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential](#) (LEAP) initiative funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service's Social Innovation Fund and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. LEAP has adapted two evidence-based models to serve youth and young adults who are in foster care, experiencing homelessness or involved in the criminal justice system. While these populations historically include higher percentages of youth with disabilities, state workforce partners should look to the accomplishments of LEAP and expand its success to specifically focus on Y&YAD.

Further, the [CareerRise](#) team in Larimer County, Colorado, supports a variety of customized services for youth and young adults ages 16 to 24, including those with disabilities, through the [inCompass](#) initiative. CareerRise engaged with state agencies to educate community partners about the availability of supports under Title I and the [Wagner-Peyser Act](#). These efforts led to referral relationships and collaborations with local school districts, VR, community mental health resources and other nontraditional WIOA partners to advance work-based learning and competitive integrated employment of Y&YAD.

3 | Build specific blended service approaches with VR agencies to enhance access to services for Y&YAD.

While WIOA calls for partnership among workforce and VR, states can struggle with identifying the best opportunities for collaboration. One potential opportunity to expand services to eligible Y&YAD exists in states where the VR agency is operating under an [Order of Selection \(OOS\)](#). In fact, 38 out of 78 VR agencies are operating under an OOS, which limits who they can serve to those with the most significant disabilities (MSD) (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). However, state workforce systems can be proactive in their approach to serving Y&YAD who do not meet the MSD definition. For example, in Baltimore County, Maryland, the [Single Step](#) program partnered with the Maryland Division of VR and the Community College of Baltimore County to serve Y&YAD with cognitive, developmental and mental health disabilities by providing academic, pre-vocational, social and independent living skills.

The Texas Workforce Commission developed the [Summer Earn and Learn](#) (SEAL) program as a statewide strategy for providing employability skills training and paid work experience for students with disabilities. The SEAL program is offered in all 28 local workforce development areas and integrates services available through VR and the local workforce area. States could expand this model to serve, either exclusively or in-part, out-of-school youth, in addition to students. In Missouri, the VR agency leveraged the opportunity of a progressive employment model through the [ExploreVR](#) initiative, to broaden access to services for Y&YAD. Specifically, Y&YAD in Missouri's career and technical education programs are referred to local job centers to access the full array of placement and training supports available under Title I and the Wagner-Peyser Act.

4 | Support inclusive approaches in programs such as Job Corps or YouthBuild to expand access to Y&YAD.

By building upon the success of the YouthBuild model in states, there is an opportunity to expand the model using universal design principles to effectively include and support Y&YAD. There are currently 175 DOL funded YouthBuild programs operating in 41 states, serving approximately 6,000 youth annually. According to "Laying the Foundation: Four Year Results from the National YouthBuild Evaluation" (Miller et al., 2018), the YouthBuild program has a proven track record in enhancing high-school equivalency attainment and college enrollment, as well as increasing employment rates and wages (Miller et al., 2018). However, the program was less effective with justice-involved youth (Miller et al., 2018), and there is little information available regarding the specific outcomes of Y&YAD in the program.

Since this report, [YouthBuild](#) has worked to implement promising practices for increasing access to YouthBuild for Y&YAD at national and local levels. For example, the national YouthBuild team is working on a comprehensive case management toolkit to equip case managers to meet the diverse needs of youth in the program. In addition, the [Social Enterprise and Training \(SEAT\) Center](#) in New York added a full-time mental health counselor and nurse practitioner within their YouthBuild initiative to address the health and wellness of youth, including Y&YAD. Many YouthBuild programs are also integrating a responsive teaching approach known as the [mockingbird methodology](#) to address the cognitive, emotional, psychological and social processes of learning. Similarly, the [Heart of Oregon Corps](#) has expanded access to YouthBuild and other programs, like [Camp LEAD](#), a week-long outdoor paid work experience, to provide access to a diverse set of experiences to build skills of Y&YAD.

Finally, Job Corps is a strong residential career training program with a 50 year history of success in fields like information technology, hospitality, advanced manufacturing, construction and healthcare. Moreover, the program has a history of serving a high proportion of Y&YAD. In fact, in program year 2022, individuals with disabilities accounted for 37 percent of the participants served in the program. To ensure these individuals are appropriately served, Job Corps has appointed disability coordinators within each program, as well as a myriad of resources available to support staff, participants and employers on the [Job Corps disABILITY](#) site. Policymakers can point to the strong systemic approach to inclusion of Job Corps when considering the design, development and restructuring of existing Title I programs.

Conclusion

Title I of WIOA provides promising avenues for states and local partners to advance the education and employment of Y&YAD. At the core of these opportunities is the need for expanded partnerships and collaboration. As WIOA partners come together, they can consider acting to leverage other federal initiatives across state workforce agencies to drive innovation at the local level; enhance collaboration among state and local workforce, education and nontraditional WIOA partners to prioritize Y&YAD; build specific blended service approaches with VR agencies to enhance access to services for Y&YAD; and support inclusive approaches in programs like YouthBuild or Job Corps to expand access to Y&YAD. While each one of these recommendations offers promises to support Y&YAD in achieving their employment and education goals, it is the combined activation of these levers which will yield the greatest opportunities across Title I of WIOA.



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