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THE ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**School-to-Work Transition and
Employment Programs for Youth
and Young Adults at Risk in the U.S.
and Other OECD Countries
Review of the Literature**

Paula Kahan-Strawczynski ♦ Liat Yurovich
With Gabriela Hoffman

The review of the literature was prepared in cooperation
and with the assistance of Ashalim



RESEARCH REPORT

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Executive Summary

For youth and young adults, employment is a springboard to a better life in the future, and especially so for those at risk. The 21st-century job market is subject to rapid change as are the type and level of qualifications in demand. The education system must therefore readapt to the realities and, alongside specific vocational training, offer generic training: a quasi-"toolbox" for every occupation to ease the student's way once he reaches the job market and to serve as a lever for continued learning (BIAC, 1999).

In light of the above, the teaching of skills and preparation for the school-to-work transition are important for all youth. It becomes even more important in the case of youth and young adults lacking certification, who may have dropped out of or finished school without the diploma or qualifications that are their entry ticket to the job market. These young adults will experience the greatest difficulty upon entering the job market and they face the greatest risk of becoming dependent on the welfare system in adulthood (OECD & CPRN, 2005).

According to Kazis & Kopp (1997), five chief barriers stand in the way of youth and young adults entering the job market: **a.** Structural changes in the economy as expressed in the types of jobs and workplaces available: for example, the shortage of suitable jobs for unskilled workers was exacerbated by the transition from an industrially-focused to a service economy, by the concentration of workplaces in large cities, and by the increase in part-time jobs. Correspondingly, there were less job opportunities for the young, especially for teenagers who had not completed high-school (Ryan, 2001). **b.** No correspondence between the skills of disadvantaged youth and the requirements of employers; **c.** Discrimination and prejudice of employers if employers believe that a particular group has little chance of succeeding at work, they will be reluctant to give group members an opportunity to work or to prove themselves; **d.** Community and family influences that encourage negative work conduct; **e.** Youth services lacking power and influence – youth services often find it difficult to provide continuity of care when different agencies are involved. This applies both to simultaneous care from a number of agencies in the present and to long-term care. Weak services and the absence of coordination and cooperation make it harder for youth to take advantage of community resources to lift themselves out of their predicament (Kazis & Kopp, 1997).

The systems covering the transition from school to work are meant to respond to at least some of the problems described above. These systems vary from state to state. Nevertheless, they share seven common aims: 1. To arrive at a large percentage of young people with either a full high-school education or a significant certificate or diploma for the work world, for institutions of higher learning or for both; 2. To help those at the end of the transition process to adult life achieve high levels of knowledge and qualifications; 3. To reduce the rate of unemployed school dropouts who are not in any framework of study or work; 4. To achieve a high employment rate among young adults aged 18+ who did not finish school; 5. To reduce the percentage of young

adults unemployed for long periods after their studies; 6. To construct stable, positive vocational and educational tracks in the years following high school; 7. To promote egalitarian achievements of different population groups in terms of gender, social background and place of residence (OECD & CPRN, 2005).

To achieve these aims, both in various European countries and in the U.S., increasing attention has been paid to partnerships between the education system, the employers' organizations and entire business sector, and the unions, occasionally via intermediaries. In addition, the literature shows that state policy in this area, which may be anchored in legislation or in built-in implementation mechanisms, is a vital component of reaching the desired results.

The goal of the present literature review is to map the support systems in the transition from school to work and the existing interface between the education system and the job market in different countries. The mapping is to support a better understanding of the advantages and problems of different transition systems, and the characteristics associated with their effective functioning.

The review reflects the conventional distinction in the literature regarding school-to-work transition programs: programs aimed at the general pupil population, particularly those prone to dropout, and employment programs aimed at youth and young adults at risk: those who have already dropped out of the school system. The review includes an analysis of existing transition programs in the U.S. and existing transition systems in a number of additional OECD states.¹

Note that the general development lines in the U.S. differ from those in additional OECD states. In the U.S., special programs are developing to promote employment for youth and young adults at risk, as well as school programs for all students to create a continuum between school and the world of work. In additional OECD states, on the other hand, efforts focus on developing inclusive, multi-professional, multi-organizational support systems ("safety nets") to prevent youth dropout or to formulate personal, alternative programs for school dropouts, and to monitor program implementation. In addition, some OECD states are developing information and counseling systems accessible to youth and young adults, particularly to those at risk: these offer guidance in employment and education as well as help in looking for jobs or study frameworks. Within the educational system, some OECD states have developed various innovative tracks of vocational training, some of which combine workplace experience with education.

¹ The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development consists of 30 democratic states.

1. School-to-Work Transition Programs for Youth and Young Adults at Risk

1.1 Goals

Programs aimed at preparing youth and young adults at risk (aged 15-24) for the working world include all or some of the following goals (Walker, 1997; Walker & Jurich, 1999; OECD, 2000; Jekielek, Cochran, & Hair, 2002):

- ♦ In the area of education: preventing school dropout (in programs aimed at pupils at risk of dropping out); providing dropouts with a basic education; equipping them with vocational training certificates
- ♦ In the area of life skills and prevention of at-risk behavior: strengthening appreciation of the connection between the personal present and the future; providing incentives to save money for the future; time-management skills, personal budget management skills, social skills etc.; containing delinquency and recidivism
- ♦ In the area of required work skills: developing proper work habits, including a work ethic; developing teamwork skills and acceptance of authority

1.2 Features of Programs in the U.S.

Despite the differences between them, the various programs for youth and young adults at risk (see elaboration in the appendix), share a number of features (Jekielek, Cochran, & Hair, 2002; OECD, 2000; Walker, 1997; Walker & Jurich, 1999).

The programs:

- ♦ are comprehensive – i.e., they include elements of vocational guidance and training alongside supplementary education, training in life skills, providing care and support systems
- ♦ put a good deal of emphasis on providing youth and young adults with long-term support – offering counseling, guidance and long-term monitoring beyond the end of the program and job placement
- ♦ emphasize also personal attention for every participant by means of both individualized programs and one-on-one mentoring
- ♦ empowerment via volunteer community work
- ♦ are concerned with fostering a positive peer group culture
- ♦ favor engaging the business sector in order to open up job doors to youth and young adults

1.3 Inclusive Systems Handling of Youth and Young Adults at Risk in Additional OECD States – "Safety Nets"

Several OECD states offer a "safety net" in the transition from school to work for youth prone to school dropout or youth and young adults outside of any employment or study setting. These programs may include several aspects, such as: preferential treatment (sometimes anchored in legislation) aimed at integrating the young into the job market; the involvement of various government and business economic bodies to create a range of training and job sites; widespread, accessible information and guidance systems aimed at helping youth and young adults to "match" their abilities and interests to jobs or training courses. They also supply information on and

guidance to suitable study frameworks according to situation, e.g., alternative schools for those on the verge of dropping out and further-study frameworks for (such as vocational training) for school drop-outs (OECD, 1999, 2000).

Other key features of the European support systems are: close monitoring of youth prone to dropout, joint work by different agencies with school dropouts, and the development of individualized programs. Thus, for example, in one program, the local authority is obliged by law to monitor school dropouts and assist them via a personal coach to develop their own operative program, which may include work or a combined education and apprenticeship programs. Program participation and advancement are a necessary condition of receiving income support (OECD 2000).

1.4 Similarities and Differences between U.S. Programs and other OECD Systems

There is a basic difference between the goals of U.S. programs and other OECD systems for youth and young adults at risk. In the U.S. the emphasis is on acquiring an elementary education, work skills and life skills in alternative frameworks outside of the educational system. The primary aim of European and Japanese systems is to restore dropout youth to the regular education network so that they may be eligible for a matriculation diploma or a vocational certificate.

Alongside the above differences, there are no few similarities between the two. The most prominent are: comprehensiveness, long-term support and follow-up, sometimes with the help of mentors from the business community, and the construction of personal programs.

2. School-to-Work Transition Programs within School

2.1 Goals

Programs aimed at ensuring a natural transition from school to work have several goals: preparation for work; preventing school dropout and/or improving scholastic achievement; preparation for, and a smoother transition to, post-high school education.

2.2 Program Components

Most of the programs bridging the worlds of school and work comprise three components (Bistocchi & Rockafellow, 2003; D'Amico et al., 2000; Walker & Jurich, 1999):

a. School-Based Learning – is learning that takes place in school and imparts some combination of theoretical knowledge and vocational skills at a high level and high standards. In recent years, programs developing in Europe have offered different combinations of theoretical and vocational studies as well as "double qualifying" pathways that prepare pupils for entry into the job market and, on the other hand, to meet the entry requirements of higher education. In addition, school-based learning includes different forms of vocational guidance towards a field of interest as the basis for choosing a field of occupation; lectures by employers at school; participation in training seminars on work-related skills such as how to write a curriculum vitae or look for a job etc.

b. *Work-Based Learning* – is learning at the workplace that offers students guidelines for the work world as well as practical training programs related to their school studies. One example is the mentoring program, which functions in the U.S. and some European countries. These programs are implemented on the basis of an agreed contract between the employer and the student, whereby he or she receives an employee status. This component may also take other forms, for example, job shadowing: a student spends a day (usually once) following a professional around on the job for a close-up look at how he works, at the work environment, at the skills brought into play etc. without himself doing any work; or short-term jobs, e.g., during summer vacation; unpaid internships or volunteering at workplaces arranged through the school.

c. *Connecting Activities* – are meant to coordinate between work-based and school-based learning by engaging employers in curriculum construction and improving the connection between high school and higher education. This component includes such activities as: periodic meetings between school teachers and professionals from the workplaces participating in the program; according academic credits for student performance at the workplace etc.

3. Program Impact and Factors of Success

Evaluation studies have been carried out of a large portion of the programs promoting the employability of youth and young adults at risk, as well as school-based transition programs developed and widely implemented in the U.S.. These studies indicate a number of benefits to both participants and the community (Jekielek, Cochran, & Hair, 2002; Walker, 1997; Walker & Jurich, 1999).

The programs provide better job opportunities than the participants would have come across on their own. They also raise participant awareness about pursuing a career around a field of interest, and about the repercussions of the present and present events for their future. Moreover, the programs offer participants knowledge and work experience to help them make more rational decisions about their future careers.

The programs for youth and young adults at risk exposed participants to meaningful relationships with mentors who serve as role models. In addition, the programs impart life skills and knowledge in diverse areas (not necessarily work-related) such as time management, social skills, parenting skills etc.

Evaluation studies of programs aimed at youth and young adults at risk indicate success with reducing at-risk behavior, such as drug and alcohol abuse or criminal activity. This, however, only held true for the duration of their participation in the program, it was not long-term (Bos, Polit, & Quint, 1997; Jekielek, Cochran, & Hair, 2002; Walker, 1997; Walker & Jurich, 1999).

School-based programs appear to lower dropout and truancy rates, and to foster positive general attitudes towards education, particularly thoughts about continuing education. However, there

were no clear-cut findings about the ability of these programs to improve scholastic achievement or help procure the significant certificate.

The following were among the community benefits: firstly, cooperation between professionals from different services and agencies, notably between teachers of academic and vocational tracks, and between the education system and the employment service; secondly, the involvement of employers in school and the curricula (BIAC, 1999; Jekielek, Cochran, & Hair, 2002; Walker, 1997; Walker & Jurich, 1999).

Several factors associated with positive outcomes emerge from the program evaluation studies. The chief ones are: work for pay as a program component; the focus on imparting basic work skills alongside vocational training; bringing the young participants into contact with meaningful adults; ongoing personal contact with and support of the participants over time; providing economic incentives to employers; involvement of the business sector in the programs from the early planning stage.

On the other hand, the main factors associated with negative outcomes were: one-dimensional, single-occurrence or short-term interventions; the absence of support services for participants (such as transportation, equipment, childcare for parental participants, especially mothers etc.); insufficient investment in staff training and strengthening the staff implementing the programs; focusing on the participants' problems instead of developing and encouraging their strengths (Jekielek, Cochran, & Hair, 2002; Walker, 1997; Walker & Jurich, 1999).

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