

both academically and practically for the world of work. The intent of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 was to provide a national framework and venture capital to allow all states to create a universal statewide transition system that offered all young Americans access to performance-based training; this training aimed to enable them to earn portable credentials, prepare them for their first jobs in high-skill, high-wage careers, and increase their opportunities for further education.

Programs funded under the School-to-Work Opportunities Act were required to integrate work-based and school-based learning components as well as "connecting activities" to match students with work-based learning opportunities through partnerships with schools, employers and other community partners. The school-based learning component centered on the student's career major and his/her ability to meet "the same challenging academic standards established for all students in their state." Work-based learning, which included work experience, workplace mentoring, and instruction in "general workplace competencies" was intended to give practical meaning to academic concepts and to transform traditional instruction into learning experiences. Connecting activities were intended to connect the school- and work-based learning components and included such activities as matching students with work-based learning positions, providing technical assistance to employers in designing work-based learning, and linking school-to-work activities with employer and industry strategies for upgrading skills.

The WIA, which superseded the Job Training Partnership Act (Pub. L. 102-367), provides a variety of work preparation programs to assist youth with disabilities in achieving their career ambitions. One of the most significant reforms under WIA section 129(c) (29 U.S.C. 2854(c)), is the consolidation of the year-round youth program and the summer youth program into a single formula-based funding stream. Under WIA, each local workforce investment area must have a year-round youth services strategy that incorporates summer youth employment opportunities as one of ten required program elements (WIA section 129(c)(2), 20 CFR 664.410). The 10 program elements reflect successful youth development approaches and focus on the following four key themes:

1. Improving educational achievement (including such elements as tutoring, study skills training, instruction leading

to secondary school completion, dropout prevention strategies, and alternative secondary school offerings);

2. Preparing for and succeeding in employment (including summer employment opportunities, paid and unpaid work experience, and occupational skills training);

3. Supporting youth (including supportive services needs, providing adult mentoring, follow-up services, and comprehensive guidance and counseling); and

4. Offering services intended to develop the potential of young people as citizens and leaders (including leadership development opportunities).⁵

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, signed by President Bush on January 8, 2002, is a landmark in education reform designed to improve student achievement and change the culture of America's schools. The Act demands stronger accountability for results for all students, including those who are economically disadvantaged, from racial and ethnic minority groups, have disabilities, or have limited English proficiency. In addition, it provides for greater flexibility for states, school districts and schools in the use of Federal funds, more choices for parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been demonstrated to work. The Act also places an increased emphasis on reading, especially for young children, enhancing the quality of our nation's teachers, and ensuring that all children in America's schools learn English.

Increasing the number of youth making a successful transition to work is integral to accomplishing the employment-related objectives of President Bush's New Freedom Initiative and is one of the U.S. Department of Labor's top priorities. A review of effective practices that span education, employment and training, youth development, and disability shows that in order to transition successfully *all* youth need the following evidence-based transition operating principles in place:

1. Access to high quality standards-based education regardless of the setting;
2. Information about career options;
3. Exposure to the world of work;
4. Opportunities to develop social, civic, and leadership skills;
5. Strong connections to caring adults;
6. Access to safe places to interact with their peers, and

7. Support services to allow them to become independent adults.

With regard to these evidence-based transition operating principles, research specifically indicates that academic and career-technical education for youth should be based on state and/or industry standards, and that youth should have access to a varied and balanced set of learning strategies appropriate for the individual. Research further reflects that in order to help youth make informed choices, they should undergo a career assessment that includes, but is not limited to, interest inventories, and formal and informal vocational assessments. Moreover, they should be exposed to job skills training and career opportunities that provide a living wage, be provided with information about education, entry requirements and income potential, and be provided structured support to post-secondary education and other life-long learning opportunities. In addition, youth with disabilities must be provided with information needed to understand the relationships between appropriate benefits planning and career choices, to learn to identify and access disability-related support and accommodations needed for the workplace and community living, and how best to communicate their disability-related support and accommodation needs to prospective employers and service providers.

Research further reflects that to transition to adulthood successfully all youth should be exposed to a range of work-based exploration experiences such as site visits, community service, job shadowing, and paid and unpaid internships. In providing such experiences for youth with disabilities, mechanisms must be in place to ensure that they learn how to request, locate, and secure the supports and accommodations they need at the workplace.

To foster leadership development, youth should be provided with exposure to role models through a variety of means, including mentoring activities designed to establish strong relationships with adults through formal and informal settings, as well as peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities. In addition, all youth should be provided skills training in self-advocacy and conflict resolution, and be exposed to personal leadership and youth development opportunities including community service. In the case of youth with disabilities, they should be exposed to mentors and role models with and without disabilities, and receive training about disability culture.

⁵ It should be noted that the evidence-based operating principles central to this grant align closely with the four key themes for serving youth under WIA.