



November 19, 2012

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I want to thank the Committee for their important work focusing on the critical issue of ensuring that ALL high school students are prepared for adulthood and the workforce, while also meeting the needs of Wisconsin's employers and communities.

My name is Beth Swedeen and I am Executive Director of the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities. I have been working to improve post-school employment outcomes for high school students with disabilities for 10 years, and have worked with more than 40 Wisconsin high schools to specifically improve employment for youth with the most significant disabilities, based on what we know the research says about preparing youth while in school.

I realize that this committee's work has not called out any specific student sub-groups, as it is focused on overall high school reform to improve workforce and college readiness. However, I would like to make the case for considering some specific supports for students with disabilities for a few important reasons:

- First, students with disabilities make up 12- 15% of the overall population;
- Second, we know these students are not accessing the same career development opportunities and coursework as their peers while in high school.
 - Not surprisingly then, they experience unemployment as adults at much higher rates. Nationally, students with significant disabilities have an employment rate of **just 19%**, compared to 70% for the general public. **In Wisconsin**, individuals in our Medicaid-funded long-term care system with developmental disabilities have employment rates of **just 9 to 14%**, and **only 4%** of those with physical disabilities are employed. Youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities have **the worst national employment outcomes** of all students with disabilities.
 - Students with disabilities experience poverty at much higher rates than the general population, and are much more likely to use publicly funded services.
 - Students with disabilities are much more likely to stay in their home communities after leaving school, where they can be a local asset or a public burden, depending on their employment status.

I am currently leading a national grant called Let's Get to Work that focuses on developing and promoting policies and practices that work for youth with significant disabilities to get them employed after high school. We are working with employers, including a great partnership with Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce to educate and support employers to hire youth with disabilities. We met

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just last week with national leaders from Walmart who traveled up from Arkansas to talk about how they can be an international leader in hiring youth and adults with disabilities. As part of the project, on Friday, Manitowoc students and teachers hosted a "Jobs First!" event in with Sen. Joe Leibham, the local Chamber, employers, and the mayor.

This grant, called Let's Get To Work, brings together schools, employers, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), the long-term care system, families, youth themselves, the Medicaid-funded long-term care system, and other community stakeholders.

I have **four recommendations** for the Committee, based on what the research tells us works for improving employment outcomes for youth with disabilities, your work as a Committee, and what we're hearing from students and their families, teachers and other school staff, and from local community leaders like Chambers of Commerce and business owners.

- 1. **First, I want to commend the Committee for its recommendation of an overall audit of all work-based learning programs administered by the Department of Public Instruction and Division of Workforce Development.**

I share the Committee's concern that students with disabilities are significantly under-represented in career development opportunities while in high school. An audit would reveal those issues and help school districts redress the situation so more students with disabilities gain access to important preparatory experiences.

- 2. **Second, make sure Academic Career Plans are specifically coordinated with students' Individual Education Plan transition planning – again, ensuring that students have access to the rich career planning and supports that will happen for most students in the general education environment.**

We appreciate that Tim Sullivan's report included expertise from Joan Wills, who has done research in collaboration with the Office of Disability Employment Policy. Her input on how academic career plans carefully consider the needs of students with disabilities is useful in supporting this recommendation.

Currently, many students with disabilities are not accessing the full set of resources available in high schools to prepare them for college and the workforce, including guidance counseling, internships, job shadows, and other career planning. A recent UW-Madison study I was part of surveyed 34 Wisconsin high school administrators about the career preparatory activities they offered at their schools.¹ Most had a wide range, including vocational courses, internships, and job shadows. Yet, when asked how

¹ Carter, E. W., Trainor, A. A., Cakiroglu, O., Swedeen, B., & Owens, L. (2010). Availability of and access to career development activities for transition-age youth with disabilities. Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 33, 13-24. doi: 10.1177/0885728809344332

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many students with significant disabilities had the opportunity to participate, more than half of schools said that none or very few youth with disabilities were participating in meaningful career prep opportunities job shadows, career exploration courses, career aptitude assessments, apprenticeships, tech-prep programs, and mentorships.

And for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities – the students who fare worst in employment outcomes compared with any other group – the access to these career development opportunities was still significantly lower than their peers without disabilities.

So as you can see, access to career prep does not happen automatically for students with disabilities. Your proposed recommendation for an audit, along with alignment of Academic Career Plans with the IEP would be strong steps to help increase access to critical career preparatory opportunities for students with disabilities. Likewise, your recommendation for DPI and DWD to do more outreach to school districts regarding programs and options available to high school students would help in this area.

To be clear, we are not asking that academic career plans be included in the Individual Education Plan, or IEP, but rather that the career plan be coordinated with the IEP. Too often in Wisconsin, we see overburdened and underprepared high school special education staff who are solely responsible for all supports and services outlined in the transition IEP. We are asking that students with IEPs have the same access to career planning and career activities typically explored in Academic Career Plans with students in general education. Much like the vocational diploma legislation includes language that aligns vocational coursework with the IEP's course of study, this effort would allow students to participate in Academic Career Planning with their peers, while the IEP could provide the necessary supports for accessing those opportunities.

If this Committee chooses to recommend that DPI create a task for to determine the specific elements of academic career plans, I recommend an expert in transition specific to youth with disabilities. We work with many of these experts in the state and would be happy to make specific recommendations.

3. Third, provide guidance that directs schools to provide community-based work assessments when appropriate and when employment is an identified post-school outcome.

I recognize this committee is trying to identify the best practices that are proven to effectively connect students to work-based experiences in the community that also respond to local workforce needs. Currently, we have too many students with significant disabilities moving straight from segregated high school experiences into facility-based, sub-minimum wage employment that is in many cases funded primarily through Medicaid dollars. Once there, data shows few young adults ever leave. Having students' first work experiences in real work settings significantly decreases their dependence on Medicaid over a lifetime.

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But this is also a workforce issue. By starting work assessments in the community in real employment situations, students have opportunities to try actual jobs and see where their strengths and interests lie, And, these are real experiences with real employers who know their workforce needs. They know their productivity needs and can work with schools so that schools can most effectively prepare students for the real workplace.

This focus on work assessments occurring in the community aligns with a new policy issued by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation this past July 1 that directs their statewide agency to no longer provide funds for facility-based work assessments. Instead, resources must only go toward assessments in real jobs in the community.

- 4. Fourth, consider policies to enhance and encourage specialization for high school special education teachers, such as a transition endorsement programs that provides specific coursework to teachers wanting to pursue supporting high school students with disabilities in transition.

Just as you are considering a special certification for STEM teachers, we are recommending changes in teacher prep focusing on preparing students with disabilities for employment after high school. Nationally, we know that students with disabilities continue to have poor post-school employment outcomes, while few teachers preparing to teach special education plan to work with high school students. Preparation to teach this population in our colleges and universities is minimal, oftentimes limited to one lecture on youth in transition during an intro special ed class.

I was part of another UW-Madison study three years ago that surveyed more than 1200 high school special education teachers on their desire for more training on career preparation for students with disabilities. More than two-thirds showed an interest in nearly every professional development opportunity listed on the survey. That message has been echoed by teachers we are working with now in our youth employment project. Even the very best veteran teachers are saying their preservice training programs did not prepare them, and they have limited access now to good professional development that can help them connect their students to quality career development opportunities.

Your memo recommendation to review teacher training programs and require programs to include instruction in relevant changes in education is a great start. We recommend legislation to create a "transition endorsement" set of courses at the post-secondary level that would equip teachers to build the career skills of their students with disabilities.

I want to thank you for providing me this opportunity to share what I have learned working with students with disabilities, their families, and their school staff. I am happy to answer any questions you have.

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