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VCU - POST HIGH WEBCAST

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>> ERIK CARTER: Welcome. I'm thrilled at the invitation to join you for this webinar. I'm Erik Carter, associate professor of special education at Vanderbilt University. My teaching focuses on identifying skills and supports and connections and relationships that young people with disabilities need to live a rich, good life during and after high school.

In my brief time today I'm going to focus on, really focus on why transition matters in the lives of young people with significant disabilities, and why the efforts that we make at schools and communities and families and businesses really hold such great potential to shift the outcomes that young people obtain both during and after high school.

In particular, I'm going to focus my time today on what we are learning from a project focused specifically on connecting young people with disabilities to early working community experiences. The focus is on increasing access to summer employment as a way to set students on a course towards meaningful careers after high school. I thought I would start by bringing you back to high school. Transport yourself to 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grade, and think about aspirations that you had for life after high school.

You probably had a combination of great expectations or maybe even some hesitations or apprehensions, but quite likely you had some vision of what a good life would be like for you after high school.

That is also true for young people with significant disabilities. They get to spend a lot of time talking to young people with disabilities about what they hope for after high school, after graduation. And they talk about things like having a great job, a safe and comfortable place to live, friends in the community, a chance to give back and be involved in community life, a reliable way to get around; all of the things that all of us aspire to, when we think about life after high school. The difference is that for many young people with significant disabilities, those aspirations don't always materialize.

The employment and college and community living outcomes for young people with disabilities, though they have improved over time, there is still a long way to go.

What I want to do is start by highlighting what we know about outcomes of young people in early years of high school. On the screen is findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study‑2, which looks at the post school experiences of students with disabilities from 2000 to 2010, and follows young people who are ages 13 to 18 for ten years until after they have gone through high school and up to eight years after leaving high school.

As you can see on the screen, the employment outcomes for many young people with disabilities between the first national longitudinal transition study and the second national longitudinal study have improved for students with learning disabilities, emotional behavioral disabilities and visual impairment, the percentage of those students working for pay up to two years after high school have improved substantially.

But you will notice on the right of the screen for students with intellectual disabilities, many of them still are not able to access early work experiences in those first two years after high school. Only 42 percent of young people with intellectual disabilities were working at any point two years after high school.

If you stretch that time line out up to four years after high school, you can see while many young people are connecting with work experiences, many more are not. For students with autism, only 61 percent of young people with autism have worked at any time up to four years after leaving high school. For students with intellectual disabilities, only 44 percent of those students have worked up to four years after high school; for students with multiple disabilities, only 46 percent. For many young people who aspire to a good job in the years after leaving high school, that dream remains elusive.

Yet, this is a charge of special education services. Right on the very front pages of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, it talks about the purpose of special education which is to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living. In some ways outcomes young people are attaining in years after high school serve as a barometer for the effectiveness and impact of what we do during middle and high school years. This poses, these outcomes pose a challenge to us. Think about what ought we be doing in terms of transition services and supports for young people with significant disabilities while they are still in high school. What can we do that will make a real difference in the outcomes that they attain in the years after leaving high school?

This has been the focus of one aspect of our project. We spent time looking at data from the national longitudinal transition study 2, which I mentioned earlier. And if you are interested in learning more about that project, their Website is WWW.NLTS2. org. You can learn more about the outcomes for young people in a range of disability categories, not just work outcomes but also college and relationships and community living outcomes as well.

We spent time looking at outcomes specifically for young people with significant disabilities, and by significant disabilities, I'm referring to students who were served under the categories of intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities, who are also eligible for the alternative assessment or whose parents indicated they had significant functional skills deficits.

We are focusing on a subset of young people with significant disabilities. You can see on the screen a description of who those students were. In the national longitudinal transition study 2 there were over 1500 students who were in wave 1, which means they were in high school in 2000, and we looked at the outcomes for those students in the two years after leaving high school.

We are focused on 450 of those students. We looked at a range of factors that might be associated with employment after high school. Our focus was on to what extent are young people with significant disabilities attaining paid community‑based work experiences up to two years after high school.

What might, what factors might account for some students who are connected to early work experiences and others who aren't.

It may be that prior work experience makes a difference, that those students who are working during high school are more likely to work after high school. Or maybe it has to do with the characteristics of students themselves, their gender, race, ethnicity or disability category. Or skill related factors that make the biggest difference, whether students have strong communication skills, are able to dress and feed themselves independently, have strong social skills or self‑advocacy skills, perhaps those are factors that make a difference between those students who are working and those who aren't.

We were interested in whether family factors make a difference. What about parent expectations? Did those shape students post school outcomes? What about availability of transportation, or parent's level of education or employment? Do those shape expectations and drive student outcomes?

Last we looked at the category of school related factors. Perhaps it's a classes that we offer to students, that jobs skills training, jobs search instruction, job coaching that we offer. Perhaps it's what schools do that shape those outcomes more than anything.

Our interest was in looking at what are the outcomes of young people with significant disabilities, and what can we learn about what sets them on a course for future employment after high school?

Here is a glimpse of what we found. For students with significant disabilities, we are disappointed to learn that only 1 quarter, 26 percent of students with disabilities were working in those first two years after high school.

So 26 percent were working, that shows it can be done. But 74 percent weren't.

Of those students who were working, nearly half of those jobs were jobs in which only other people with disabilities worked as well. They were segregated jobs, pay was relatively low, and students worked or young people worked about 21 hours per week. What makes the difference between those 26 percent of young people who are working after high school, and those 74 percent who weren't working?

We looked at those factors that I mentioned a bit earlier. We found that one of the most prominent predictors of whether students were working after high school was whether or not they had paid work experiences during high school.

Those students who had paid work experiences work, were two and a half times more likely to be working after high school than those who didn't. That lays out a nice pathway for those of us who work in high schools and middle schools, pushes us to think about the power of those early work experiences, and challenges us to think about what are the venues to which we can connect young people with disabilities to those kinds of work experiences.

Paid work experiences really do make a difference.

The second thing we looked at was student demographic factors. Of the various factors we looked at, males were twice as likely to be working as females in the years after high school, early years after high school. That should challenge us to think about making sure that early work opportunities, career development activities are equally available or equitably available to all students while they are still in middle and high school. We looked at skill related factors. What are skills we might teach students and emphasize in our programs that could set them on a course for future adulthood. It is often discussed in the literature, social skills seem to matter. Students who had high ratings of social skills were two and a half times more likely to be working after high school relative to those individuals who had low ratings of social skills.

Independence skills also seem to make a difference. Those students who are able to feed or dress themselves more independently, they were 2.7 times more likely to be working after high school.

We know that early work experiences make a difference. We know that there are skills that might, we might target that we can shape in those, through curricular intervention and social skills intervention.

Another factor that seems to make a difference which surprised us in terms of its prominence was the role of family expectations.

When parents in high school expected their adolescent child to work in the years after high school, those students were nearly three and a half times more likely to get a paid job after high school.

Similarly, parents who had high household responsibilities for their child while they were in high school, chores around the house, for example, those students were two times as likely to be working after high school. Parents' expectations can make a profound difference in the future employment outcomes of young people with disabilities.

The last thing that we looked at was the list of school related factors that I mentioned earlier.

We were really surprised that none of those factors, not the goals of the students, classes that they took, none of those were predictors of post school employment outcomes when considered alongside early work experiences.

Early work experiences, hands‑on work experiences in the community, were a more powerful predictor of post school employment outcomes than the kinds of more indirect experiences we offer in high school.

That is not to suggest that what we offer in schools in terms of course work and skills instruction isn't important. But we need to couple that with real life hands‑on work experiences in the community for students with significant disabilities. That seems to be the pathway to post school employment outcomes.

We know that many young people with significant disabilities aren't working after high school. But we also know something about the kinds of things that we can do during middle school and high school that can increase the number of students who are able to access those work experiences.

So it means that middle school and high school is a critical juncture, and the kinds of programs that we offer, the supports we offer and opportunities we offer hold great potential to make a real difference in the outcomes of young people.

That is really where I want to turn next. What could we do during those high school years, for example, that would prepare students well for future jobs and raise their aspirations for future jobs?

As part of our project, one of the things we looked at was the extent to which high schools were offering an array of career development activities. This will be hard to read on your screen. We will post this as a handout. One of the studies we did looked at the extent to which high schools were offering things like career interest assessments, tours of colleges or technical schools, job shadowing programs, speakers brought in from local business. We looked at whether they offered career exploration courses or college fairs or career days, tours of businesses, career and job counseling, career aptitude assignment, apprenticeship programs, paid or unpaid internships, job fairs or career days, tech programs, career job resource centers, whether they helped students with written career plans, offered cooperative education programs, held job placement services for students, offered mentorships for students, or offered school based enterprises or businesses. There is an array of things schools may offer by way of career development preparation for all students in the school. We were interested in the extent to which students with significant disabilities were accessing those experiences. We were disappointed to learn that despite the fact that many high schools offer a wealth of career development activities, the challenge becomes helping young people with significant disabilities access those existing opportunities.

We found, you will see this highlighted on the screen, that in many of these schools that we worked with, none or few students with significant disabilities were accessing those kinds of career development activities.

In one part, that is a missed opportunity for students with significant disabilities. That is a challenge for us, who are teachers and special educators, general educators and vocational educators, to think about how we might better connect young people with disabilities to those kinds of already existing learning opportunities.

The other venue that holds promise for shaping the post school employment outcomes of young people with disabilities is early work experiences. People who work during high school are two and a half times more likely to be working after high school. Yet when we look at data from the national longitudinal transition study, at the extent to which students, all different disability categories were actually, had worked at any point during the prior year while still in high school, we found that while students with learning disabilities and other health impairments worked at fairly high rates, only 15 percent of students with autism held a job in the past year.

Only 22 percent of students with multiple disabilities had worked at any point in the last year. Only 36 percent of students with intellectual disabilities worked at any point in the last year.

That set the context for Project Summer. Project summer was the name of our project. This is an IES funded project, funded by the National Center for Special Education Research at the Institute of Education Sciences, and our charge was to develop a set of strategies that schools and communities could use to connect young people with significant disabilities to work experiences in their communities.

Our particular focus, as the name of the project suggests, was on summer employment. We saw this as an untapped opportunity for many young people with disabilities.

Those of you who are watching, many of you probably worked at some point during high school, and probably two‑thirds to four‑fifths of you worked at some point in the summer.

This is what young people do in the summer months. Many work. It's a normative experience for many high school students. It is also a time when there are typically more job openings for young people, and so it increases the opportunities, the availability of jobs for students with significant disabilities as well.

There is a lot of concern and tension about job experiences during the school year, the sense that should we be focusing on academics, on community‑based experiences. Summer employment opportunities don't force that tension.

You can work during the summer months and hopefully continue those jobs after school or on weekends during the school year, so there is not competition between academics and work.

For students with significant disabilities, summer jobs might actually reduce learning loss that happens over the two or three months when they are not in school.

If students start working in the summer months, early on, it means they can start working much earlier than they typically have their first job. And if you add up all of the summer months for students with significant disabilities from age 14 to age 21, you will find that there is about two years of potential work experiences that students might gain.

For many students, those are missed opportunities right now. Summers are a real opportune time to promote early work experiences, yet it is not a time we often talk about in school based planning and transition services.

As I mentioned, our charge was to figure out, what might schools do in partnership with communities to begin to tap into this opportune work time?

We have three phases to our development project. Over the course of the remainder of this webinar, I want to walk through each of these three phases, to give you a glimpse into what we learned about factors that might make a real difference in connecting students to these kinds of experiences.

In phase 1, our focus was on learning the extent to which young people with disabilities were working during the summer months. There hasn't been good data on the extent to which that is happening. Because we knew some students would be connected to those work experiences, we wanted to know what makes the difference between those students who are working and those students who aren't, those students who are engaged in meaningful summer activities, and those who are sitting at home or on the couch.

What differentiates successful summer outcomes from less successful outcomes? That was one part of our project.

The second part was to make sure that whatever we developed was going to work in every day schools and communities. We spent a lot of time talking to key stakeholders, what we learned from teachers and family members and businesses and employer networks about how to design services and supports that make sense for a community and are feasible with their resources.

Both of those phases of the project helped us design a set of five intervention practices that are implemented in a subset of high schools in Wisconsin.

We wanted to know if you combine these strategies and implement them for students, is it going to produce a noticeable change in the extent to which students are accessing early work experiences. Phase 3 focused on what is the impact of these services or these practices on youth summer employment outcomes.

We will walk through each of the phases. I'll highlight what we learned along the way about each.

The first phase was a descriptive study. We wanted to learn to what extent are young people with disabilities accessing these summer employment experiences. They are typical in most communities for most high school students. This is a project that was carried out in Wisconsin.

It involved nearly 400 students with disabilities, about 136 of whom had significant disabilities, which meant they had a disability labeled intellectual disabilities or autism, and they were eligible for the state's alternate assessment. These are students with the most extensive support needs in their schools.

On your screen you can get a sense of who these students were in terms of the demographics, gender, race, ethnicity, grade, age level and free and reduced lunch status. These were students who were drawn from 34 high schools across the state, some rural, some urban, some large or mid‑size cities. You can get a sense of the range of schools in which these students were attending.

We were interested in whether summer employment opportunities were different in more urban areas than in more rural areas. There is a host of issues that come up in each of the areas that might call for difference responses in terms of services and supports.

We collected a range of measures for all of the 400 students who were part of our project. We collected information about their self‑determination, their employment and transition skills, their social skills. We asked questions of teachers and youth and parents about students' future goals, their expectations for these students in terms of summer work experiences.

We looked into the kind of course work that they took during the prior school year before the summer months.

We also, to learn about the extent to which they were working in the summer, we called all of those 400 youth or their parents at the beginning of summer and then again at the end of summer, so around June and August, to learn about the extent to which they were accessing those summer experiences and the kinds of services and supports that wrapped around them to make that happen.

Here is what we learned. Across 400 students, we learned two‑thirds of students with learning disabilities worked at some point in the summer months. Interestingly, that is about typical for what youth without disabilities work. Most, in most summers, a little lower over the past few years, between two‑thirds and three‑quarters of youth without disabilities worked at some point during the given summer.

For students with emotional/behavioral disabilities only 40 percent of those students were working at any point in the summer. When we took a closer look at those two time points, we found many of the young people with emotional/behavioral disabilities who were working at the beginning of the summer had lost their jobs or changed jobs by the end of the summer. That spoke to the need to find strong job matches for them and think differently about how supports are provided with students who often don't identify as having a disability at their job site.

For students with intellectual disabilities who weren't alternate assessment eligible, one third of the students, 35 percent were working during summer months. If you had a significant disability, only 15 percent of those students were working at any point during the summer months.

This suggests there is a missed opportunity for many young people with significant disabilities who would love to work during the summer and explore their career interests during the three months when school is not in session. One of the things we were interested in understanding more about, what makes the difference between 15 percent of students with significant disabilities who are working and the 85 percent who weren't? We looked at a range of measures that we collected. We looked at students' age, gender, race, ethnicity, whether they were free and reduced lunch eligible, ratings of social skills and self‑determination, whether they had high or low level of problem behavior, looked for teacher expectations whether students would work in the summer months, at whether students worked during the prior school year, whether they were working during spring prior to summer. We looked at ratings of students' job skills.

When you look at all those factors together, there are two things that shook out as having the highest predictive value of whether students worked during the summer months. They might surprise you. The two things that jumped out as making the difference between those students who worked and didn't work were these.

Teacher expectations: When teachers during the school year had expectations that these students would find or pursue a job during the summer months, those students were many times more likely to be working during the summer months.

Similarly, for students who had been connected to jobs during the spring semester, they were also much more likely to either maintain those jobs during the summer months or find new jobs during the summer months.

This speaks to two things. One is, putting this on the radar of teachers early on and raising their expectations for thinking about summer as an opportune time to work, but also finding ways to connect students to paid jobs long before the last day of school when the school bus no longer shows up.

Spring work experiences and teacher expectations do make a difference. When we looked closer at the sorts of things that teachers were doing during the school year to prepare for summer employment, we found only one quarter of all teachers in our project, 400 students with whom we focused on in this phase of the project, only one‑quarter had any kind of conversation with their student about the upcoming summer. We thought this is also perhaps a missed opportunity to do planning around those three months when school wasn't in session.

We learned quite a bit in that early phase about some things that might make a difference in increasing employment outcomes. We parked those as we thought about how to develop a set of intervention strategies that might make a difference in the lives of young people with disabilities.

The second phase of the project which overlapped with the first involved spending a lot of time talking to key stakeholders about their perspective of the facilitators and barriers to summer work experiences for students with disabilities.

We interviewed teachers. We talked with parents of kids with disabilities. We interviewed youth themselves and held focus groups about what they thought about summer activities and their intentions to work and the expectations parents and teachers had for summer work experiences.

We surveyed chambers of commerce throughout the state to ask about the roles they might play in helping connect young people with disabilities or informing teachers about viable employment opportunities in their local communities.

We held focus groups with employers, to inquire about what they were looking for in youth employees. We interviewed a community connectors who played a role in connecting young people with disabilities to jobs out in the community.

We held a series of community conversations, where we looked at what the resources and assets and connections existed within a given community that could be drawn upon to improve youth employment.

We did surveys of school administrators to find out about career development programming they offered in schools and the extent to which young people with disabilities were accessing these career development experiences. Our goal was to learn from each of the stakeholders about what it would take to improve summer employment outcomes for young people with disabilities.

I'll highlight a couple of the findings from these projects. Each of them you can learn more about if you are interested in learning, interested in reading studies associated with each of the stakeholder groups. We will post a list of references that you can draw upon on the Website where this webinar is hosted.

But we talked with teachers, for example, about the viability of summer as a place for emphasizing early work experiences. They saw the value of summer employment. Repeatedly they saw that the three months were often untapped times or times when students were missing out on opportunities to develop their transition portfolios, build their resume's, and learn skills that would help them in future careers. They thought of ways summer employment could be supported, whether through rethinking how we do extended school year services, or reconfiguring staffing during the summer months, or thinking about new ways to address transportation issues.

But they also acknowledged that it is going to take more than just teachers to connect young people to summer work experiences. They already had lots on their plate. They needed the partnerships with people who knew business well or who knew where employment opportunities were. They needed partnership with families who would be supporting their students in the summer months or their children in the summer months.

They needed strong partnerships with other community members. That had to be an important part of, has to be an important part of any schools' response, developing those kinds of partnerships. We also surveyed chambers of commerce throughout the state. Every community has an employment network like a Chamber of Commerce.

We were interested in the extent to which they saw themselves as potential partners in increasing youth employment opportunities. The way we did that, we surveyed these chambers of commerce throughout the state, and we asked them the extent to which they felt partnering in each of 17 or 18 ways would be viable for them given their current resources and staffing.

We were surprised at the extent to which chambers of commerce said they would be willing to help cosponsor a job fair or job shadowing day, their willingness to help match youth to job openings in the community, or to provide feedback to teachers at the school about the quality of their career development and vocational programs.

Many were willing to speak at high schools or to invite teachers to speak at chamber meetings about the needs of youth with disabilities in their community. There is a range of ways that you can see on the screen that chambers of commerce were willing to partner if they were asked. Many reported that they were simply never asked by schools to partner in these ways.

What was interesting in this particular study is that we asked some chambers to respond to the ways in which they would partner with schools in reference to students with disabilities, and some chambers we never mentioned students with disabilities. We just asked whether they would partner in these ways for youth in general.

We learned by dividing up the surveys in that way that when asked about supporting schools to help students with disabilities connect to jobs, chambers were a little bit more reluctant and less likely to say that was a feasible option. That really speaks to the need to approach chambers in ways that perhaps reflect the needs of all students in a school, and help them understand the ways in which the things that they already do might be a valuable asset for students with disabilities.

Many of the chambers which are themselves connected to businesses throughout that community were willing to partner with schools, but needed to be asked and directed to understand what form that partnership might take.

I've gone through fairly quickly two phases of the project to give you a glimpse into what seems to make a difference in terms of promoting early work experiences for students with disabilities, as well as some of the perspectives of teachers, family members, youth, employers and other stakeholders on what would facilitate or hinder early work experiences for young people with disabilities.

During the final phase of our project, we tried to merge all of the lessons from these two phases into an intervention package that we piloted with seven high schools in Wisconsin.

Here the charge was to figure out if we identify a set of strategies that schools and communities can work, can use, would those strategies work in terms of would they promote better outcomes for young people with disabilities? And would they be feasible for every day schools?

Our intervention package involved five strategies. I'm going to walk through each of these one at a time. But they involved a series of community conversations that were held in each community. Each community did resource mapping to identify resources and assets that could be drawn upon to promote youth employment and community involvement.

Each of those communities did summer focused planning with students to do thinking about the opportunities that existed in the community, the kinds of jobs students might want to have and the supports that would need to be in place to make that happen.

Each of those high schools identified community connectors who would serve as a bridge between the planning that occurred with students and opportunities that existed in local communities. Their job was to connect students' interests with employment opportunities.

They did that by partnering with employer liaisons, someone on the business side in each community who knew that community well, who knew where the jobs were, and could, if they knew what a student's interests were, find a potential employer who could use someone with knows gifts and interests.

I'll walk through each of the five strategies before I share with you how it made a difference in employment outcomes of students who participated in the project. Each of the 7 high schools that participated in the project were involved in hosting a community‑wide conversation, focused on how that community, that local community could draw upon all the strengths and resources and assets it had to improve employment opportunities for young people with and without disabilities.

The way these conversations often worked is they involved inviting a broad cross section of the community together for usually a two hour evening event, that was done over coffee and desserts, and was a time when civic leaders, school leaders, teachers, parents, youth, employers, community members, local community nonprofits, were all gathered together and brainstormed what resources they had that could be drawn upon by schools to improve employment outcomes.

The way these community conversations were launched was through a series of invitations that went out either by eVite or electronic invitation or E‑mail or through announcements in newspapers, or invitations that were posted throughout the local community inviting anyone in the community to a community conversation on increasing employment for youth with disabilities. You get a glimpse of ways communities invited folks. We were struck by how many people in the community showed up for these events. More than 350 community members came out for these 7 events. They ranged in size from as few as 20 members in a community to as many as 80 people coming out for the event. You will see on the screen a glimpse of the roles of individuals who came to the events, folks from schools, folks from community agencies, nonprofit organizations, local employers, civic leaders, congregational leaders, all showed up because they were asked to share their ideas and their input on how the community could work more in tandem to improve employment outcomes for all students. The idea with community conversations is you want to bring in people who are working within the service system, but you want to get folks working beyond the service system, beyond the usual suspects as we say.

At these conversations, large percentage of individuals who came were school staff, or folks from human services, but there was also a large number of employers who came, and family members and youth themselves, as well as others who might have included civic leaders or media or mayors or others.

For those two hours, there is a structured approach that is used to elicit ideas for how the community could address employment for youth with disabilities, and it begins by introducing the topic for the evening.

For about ten minutes, someone might facilitate the discussion by introducing the overall goal for the project, which is to increase employment outcomes. They might highlight some of the contributions of early work experiences to youth development and long‑term outcomes. They might highlight some of the changing demographics of the community and the need to ensure that there is a strong local work force.

They also highlighted a lot of businesses that are already hiring youth with disabilities to show that it really can be done in this particular community.

For about five or ten minutes, the topic for the evening is introduced. And then the facilitator poses the questions that matter. In this case, the question that was posed at each of these events was, what can we do as a community to open up summer employment opportunities for youth with disabilities?

You will notice it is asset focused questions, not focused on what are we doing wrong, where are we falling short. It is getting people to think creatively about what could we do. For 15 to 20 minutes, folks around round tables begin to discuss their own ideas for that around that question.

You might have parents and teachers and youth and someone from Social Security all sitting down at the same table sharing their ideas and building off each other's ideas as well.

That goes on for 15 or 20 minutes. Someone rings a bell. Everyone gets up and moves to a different table. And they continue the conversation on that same question, sharing ideas they heard during the previous round of discussion, building on those and expanding and deepening those ideas.

You might have now someone from a business owner sitting down with someone from a faith community, sitting down with a parent and a mayor and someone from the Chamber of Commerce, each raising some of the issues that they see, and identifying solutions to common barriers in that local community.

That happens often two or three times. At the end of two or three rounds of discussion, after everyone is mixed up and has spoken with as many as 16 or 18 other individuals, there is the harvest time where everyone shares back the very best ideas that they heard throughout the evening, in kind of a group share back.

Someone will often stand at the front of the room, with paper on the walls, and people will share the best ideas that they heard, and the idea is to pinpoint the next three or four or five steps the community might take to become a place where these employment opportunities really abound. In addition to what people are sharing back at the end of the evening, throughout the evening people have been writing their ideas down on paper tablecloths at each table. There has been a table host. She has been writing down every idea that was shared.

The community really ends up with a roadmap for what they might do next in terms of expanding employment opportunities in their local community.

I put up on your screen examples of the ideas that came from different communities, from some of the various communities that were part of the phase of the project. At the end of the evening, after all the ideas are compiled, a team usually comprised of folks from the high school and likely from local community agencies compile all the ideas that were shared into a report that goes back to folks who attended, as well as people who were unable to attend.

You can see here on your screen an example of a section of one of those community conversation summary reports, where they highlighted some of the barriers that businesses raised, in terms of issues that businesses raised related to hiring people with disabilities.

They might not be aware or know how to hire people with disabilities. They might have concerns about training costs or high turnover rates. Accompanying that is all the solutions or responses that were identified in that community, that addressed those core barriers.

Essentially, communities left with a roadmap of where they might go next in terms of strategies to increase employment opportunities.

For example, in one of the community conversations, the theme of the role of chambers of commerce in promoting the idea of hiring people with disabilities was really emphasized.

Within a week or two after the community conversation event, the Chamber of Commerce, which I think represented several hundred if not 1,000 local businesses, put in their Chamber of Commerce newsletter an announcement, calling upon all businesses that were willing to hire youth with disabilities to contact the local high school to share that interest.

A number of summer jobs came out of that particular announcement. What was interesting is that among the 350 people who came to these conversation events across the 7 communities, most, even though they were already connected to disability issues or employment issues, reported that they learned about resources and opportunities and connections in their community that they simply didn't know about, because they had an opportunity to sit down with so many people who represented a cross section of their community.

Many of them, the large majority said this, that they agreed or strongly agreed that the conversation would contribute to better employment outcomes for youth in their community.

When asked about whether they were able to identify things that they personally could do to improve employment outcomes as a result of the conversation, the vast majority of attendees said that they learned, they agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

Finally, when asked whether the conversation improved their own perceptions of the community's capacity to improve work employment outcomes for youths with disabilities, the vast majority felt that was the case.

These are relatively easy, fun, engaging ways to bring in lots of new people to work in tandem to improve a youth employment outcome, as well as to make a lot of connections that teachers reported they need with businesses and transportation providers and agencies, to support those kinds of summer employment experiences.

Those events were all held in Wisconsin. I now live in Nashville, Tennessee. We recently hosted one of these events and drew 80 members of our community. You can see on your screen an example of what our invitation looked like, what our core questions were for the evening. And it was a very productive time where we were able to pinpoint some next steps for that community in terms of where we might go to improve employment outcomes.

If you are interested in hosting an event like this, we have got some resources that you can draw upon. I put on your screen a guide that we have developed. It is completely free and can be downloaded at the Website that I've included on the screen.

It is a step by step guide for launching inclusive efforts through community conversations. This will walk you through how to set up a community conversation, how to invite folks, and how to facilitate such an event.

That was the first strategy. I spent a little bit more time on that than I will on the other strategies, because I think that is a little bit new in terms of an approach for schools and communities.

The second approach is going to be familiar to many of you. It involves resource mapping, a lot of conversation about the importance of mapping the resources and opportunities that exist in a community, so that that information is available to all teachers and all parents and all community members and all providers.

What we did in each of the 7 communities, we helped those communities map all of the different opportunities and supports that could be drawn upon to connect students to summer jobs or other kinds of recreational opportunities in their community.

Some of those ideas or opportunities came from the community, conversations themselves. But we set up a Website where people could submit their own ideas for resources and opportunities in their local community, and all of that information then was compiled into a guide that was posted on‑line and can be shared back with families, teachers and others who are interested in knowing what resources could be drawn upon to support a particular child that they worked with.

These guides can all be downloaded from the Website that I shared with you earlier. To give you a glimpse of what they look like inside, the guides are organized around ways that youth might actually draw upon the information.

The guide was organized around five themes, resources for getting around town, because transportation is often such a barrier to employment, a section on finding friends and fun activities, a section on searching for a job, a section on keeping a job, and a section on volunteering and community service, because we know that volunteering and community service can be also a way that students develop skills that help them in their future careers.

On your screen is a glimpse of some of those entries. You will see they included the organization, a Website, a contact phone number and a description of what the resource was. Some of them focused on recreation opportunities, other on youth development opportunities.

When we could, we included the names of people in these organizations who would be receptive to thinking about how youth with disabilities could participate.

Each of the communities developed a resource map that could be drawn upon by teachers and parents and used themselves.

The third strategy that each school implemented involved summer focused planning. This was not designed or intended to be a separate planning meeting, another IEP meeting or another transition planning meeting, but simply an approach to ensure that conversations about summer months occurred between students and youth, students and teachers and their family members.

So sometimes conversations about summer could happen within the context of an IEP meeting, or they were happening through casual conversations the teachers had with students over the course of the school year. We developed a two page planning tool, something that you can download if you are interested in using it as is or adapting. It focused on core questions.

The first was, asked who was part of the planning meeting. It was important that youth themselves be part of the discussion. Really encourage the discussions not only to happen between teachers and youth but also family members and perhaps employers or other community members who might have some connection to what the students' goals were for the future or for the upcoming summer months.

The second question on the planning tool is, what are some of the students' long‑term big picture goals for life after high school? Is it important to link summer experiences to future long‑term aspirations?

It may be that if a student has a particular goal to work in a particular industry, summer jobs can be a way of sampling what that might be like and building a resume' that would lead them towards a job in that particular employment sector.

The third question asked about what students' short term goals are for the upcoming summer months, that might lead them or set them on a course towards that future goal.

So on the next page, the second page of the form, it asks the team to list each of the summer related goals, and for each of the goals to brainstorm what are some possible places in the community that those goals can be met. Who do we already know, or do we need to seek out, that might help connect the students to those kinds of goals. What are the supports or resources that are needed to make that happen. And for each of the resources or supports, who is going to take responsibility for following up on that.

Sometimes that would be parents, sometimes that would be teachers, sometimes that would be youth themselves. But it is a simple format for embedding those questions in existing planning meetings. We put a resource, citation on the bottom of the screen, if you want to read more about how to implement that summer focused planning. The first strategy, identifying one or two people we call community connectors at each high school, sometimes a paraprofessional, parent advocate, anyone who was interested in serving in that role.

As planning is done, you need someone who can connect to students' goals and plans for the upcoming summer, real opportunities in the local community. We have all been part of a planning process where we develop plans and they fall short because this isn't, there isn't someone to make sure it is implemented. In each of the schools, one or two community connectors were identified who, after they heard what a student wanted to do, would connect with an employer liaison who knew where in the community this experience could find a home.

That leads us to the last strategy, identification of one or more employer liaisons in each of the communities. Sometimes they were a member of a Chamber of Commerce. Sometimes they were a prominent business member. But the idea is that they were always someone who knew employment opportunities really well.

We heard from teachers in our interviews in the earlier phase of the project that they knew about supporting students with disabilities on the job, but they didn't know where all job opportunities are in the community.

Who knows better where all the jobs are than someone from within that network? In each of those communities, we identified one or two, sometimes more folks who were on the business side of things, who would listen to the community connector, who said I've got a student who is real interested in working in a veterinary clinic or dental clinic or who wants a job at a particular type of business.

They would then find all the businesses that fit that description, and make an introduction between the student and the community connector and that local employer.

Those are the five strategies that were implemented in each of these seven communities: Community conversations, resource mapping, summer focused planning, community connectors and employer liaison.

What happens when you implement the strategies together in communities? Do they really make a difference in the outcomes of young people with disabilities?

That was the question that we explored in the final phase of our project. This phase of the project involved 130 students with disabilities, 67 of whom were students with significant disabilities. They attended seven different high schools in both rural and urban communities.

Those 67 students were randomly assigned to either receive this intervention, set of intervention strategies, or to just have their typical transition services business as usual.

Here is what we found. Among students with significant disabilities, who received those five intervention strategies, nearly three‑quarters of them were connected to some type of community work experience in the summer months that followed.

Nearly three‑quarters of the students were connected to some kind of summer work experiences. That is really right in the pocket of the extent to which youth without disabilities access some kind of summer work experience.

That compares to only 29 percent of students with the same disabilities, the same communities, who weren't successful, who were successful in connecting to summer jobs. So a big difference, dramatic difference in employment outcomes based on those five simple strategies.

In terms of looking closer at the kinds of work experiences that they accessed, only 45 percent of students access paid work experiences. 20 percent got internships or some kind of volunteer job opportunities. In large part those 21 percent of students actually were slated for paid jobs, but because of some economic circumstances in local communities, where the tourism industry was decimated by a natural disaster, those jobs were converted to internships for that particular year.

That compares to only 11 percent of students without disabilities in the same communities who found paid jobs who didn't receive these intervention strategies.

Students were nearly five times more likely to find paid jobs as a result of this intervention. Those students all worked for above minimum wage. They worked about eleven hours to twelve hours per week. Most were checked on by someone. That didn't always mean the school was the person checking on them. Sometimes it was someone from a school. Often it might have been a family member, a job coach who was funded by a local agency or by vocational rehabilitation.

But the person who checked on them was set up long in advance of the summer months. That planning process that was used with students earlier on in the spring semester or in winter really focused on identifying who of the supports that would be provided to students.

And because that summer focused planning was done early on in the school year, about half of the students were connected to jobs long before summer started, so that they could get acclimated to the job, so supports could be set up at the job site, so transportation could be arranged so that the day after school ended, that job was already in place and supports were in place and the student could be successful right from day one of summer months.

Those students who were working all worked in different businesses, so students weren't all clustered in a single job. They assumed a range of different job responsibilities, from cleaning to child care to food services, to clerical jobs, animal care, grounds maintenance. The idea was that jobs tended to match what students' interests were as articulated in their summer planning processes.

The idea is you are hopefully getting better individualized jobs, because you have a sense of what students want to do, and how the summer job experiences might link to later post school job experiences.

That gives you a sense of the kinds of outcomes that can occur when you set up these five strategies in local high schools and communities. What is interesting is that our intervention package didn't include any explicit skills instruction for students with significant disabilities.

There was no curriculum that was implemented. There was no targeted skill instruction that all of the students received. Instead what we focused on is building community capacity, identifying local employment opportunities and putting in place people who could make those connections between students' interests and local jobs.

That is not to say that skill instruction isn't important or that we shouldn't focus on curricular interventions as well, but really to highlight the impact that these connections and opportunities can really make for summer employment outcomes.

Think about what happens if you also build in systematic instruction on top of that. Perhaps that employment numbers would increase even further where the quality of those work experiences would increase even further.

That would be our goal. For students with emotional, behavioral disabilities, whom I haven't talked about very much in this webinar, they were also part of our intervention evaluation. 60 students with emotional behavioral disabilities also received the intervention or business as usual comparison condition.

We found that there was an increase in employment outcomes for students with EBD who received this intervention package as well, but wasn't as exciting as it was for students with significant disabilities. It suggests to us that there are other things that we need to put in place for students with high incidence disability. We need to embed a stronger family component into this intervention, as well as think about how to provide supports to youths with EBD on the job when they are not interested in disclosing a disability on the job or reluctant for explicit obvious job support. Those are things we need to think about and look further into.

Where do we go from here? We are excited about the impact that these strategies can have. We were also impressed that teachers and parents and community members viewed these strategies to be fairly feasible, but they were things that they could readily do on top of all the other responsibilities that they have in their local schools. It seemed to be a set of intervention strategies that both work and that are also feasible.

For those of you who are thinking about what this might look like in your local community, these are highly adaptable strategies. Community conversations can be implemented in a variety of ways. Resource mapping can be carried out to a number of different avenues.

These are strategies you can tailor for your own community to make sure they make sense and fit well with the culture of your community. I think you will also find that these strategies are ones that are fairly easy to implement and yet can have a very profound impact on students.

In terms of where we go next, we want to look more closely at these community organizing approaches as a viable way for engaging a greater cross section of communities in these efforts.

Improving employment outcomes can't be the task of schools alone. It can't be the task of agencies alone. We do have to work in concert, if we are going to make a noticeable difference in the employment landscape for young people with disabilities.

I think the other piece that we need to strengthen, and many of you are probably already doing work in this area, is to think about strengthening the family component. How do we raise family expectations for employment, and support them to encourage their own child and equip their child to develop the kinds of skills and attitudes and aspirations that are going to make them successful in the workplace, both while they are in high school and down the road in the future.

This is a project like a lot of projects; successful projects are collaborative. This is certainly no exception. I put on your screen a number of individuals who partnered on this work, whose efforts really made it happen. I want to make sure that they are acknowledged as well, particularly Audrey Trainor, coinvestigator on this project, and Beth, who is the project coordinator. A lot of people worked together and were heavily invested in this work. I want to make sure they are acknowledged.

I hope this has been intriguing for you, that it's whet your appetite for looking more closely at how these strategies might be implemented in your local communities. I am excited about hearing some of the questions that you have related to what I've shared today and responding to those.

If there are other resources that you are interested in learning more about, I encourage you to E‑mail me. I put that on the screen. I can share more with you of the individual studies we have done that explored each of the components in greater depth.

To conclude, thank you for your time. And I wish you well as you strive to improve employment outcomes and other transition outcomes for young people with disabilities in our community. There are certainly no more important endeavor than that. I wish you well in your efforts. Thanks.

(end of webcast)