

# External Evaluation Report



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December 2015

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to provide an external evaluation of King County's School-to-Work (S2W) Initiative. It has been 10 years since this initiative began in 2005, seeking to improve the employment outcomes of young people with developmental disabilities leaving high schools. I also conducted an external review of this initiative in 2010. As such, this 2015 review is a reprise of the 2010 report. This effort was initiated by the King County Developmental Disabilities Division in collaboration with school districts, Vocational Rehabilitation, providers of employment services, regional case management, and family advocates. Ten years into this initiative, King County School-to-Work has seen major successes, including an increasing percentage of youth and families engaging in school to work. And, there are continuing opportunities to improve outcomes even further.

The basic questions for this evaluation were three:

### **What's Working? – What's Not Working? – What's Next?**

Transition from school to work has long been a priority nationwide, with uneven results across the country. Historically, while this nationwide effort began initially in the 1980s, recent years have brought a renewed effort to improve transition outcomes. Indeed, the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act creates a renewed emphasis on transition age youth. King County's last decade of investment in transition is unique in its collaboration and unique funding structure with County funding, in addition to schools investment in transition, along with funding and services from Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). In the last ten years, King County, with the leadership of the county division of developmental disabilities, has sustained a highly focused effort for creative funding and unique collaboration among schools, families, government and providers of services. This has resulted in more youth gaining employment outcomes, a higher percentage of youth served, and more students with high support needs now included.

## External Evaluation Approach

This evaluation is based on a review of available data, review of related documents, focus group meetings and individual interviews. In recent months, I met with 115 people. Participants included:

- Families of young people in transition
- DDA case managers

- Vocational Rehabilitation personnel
- Employment vendors
- School district personnel
- County personnel
- Transition initiative personnel
- Providers of training and technical assistance
- Advocacy leaders
- State (VR and DDA) leadership

## Outcomes To Date

As noted in 2010, King County has established processes for working together that set clear expectations and timelines for leaving school with a job. Important features of this collaboration, as was the case in 2010, include:

- Families engage in a transition discussion about employment more than a year before leaving school.
- School districts are establishing a commitment to employment outcomes, including some districts providing additional funding for transition.
- Employment vendors engage with schools and with high school students well before the students end their school years.
- Commitment on the part of Vocational Rehabilitation to provide funding for transition.
- Case managers emphasizing transition and employment outcomes with individuals and families.
- An upfront investment by the King County DDD.
- A more recent initiative to include students with higher support needs.

In the process of contacting families who have children who may be eligible for DDA services when leaving school, King County personnel seek out and encourage each young person and their family to set a goal of employment by the age of 21 and participate in the overall initiative. Five years ago, about 50% of the eligible students and their families elected to participate and set employment as a transition goal. In 2015, nearly 70% of youth and families are engaged. For overall employment outcomes, the available data suggest about 13% of all possibly DDA eligible students employed in the years 2003 – 2005. This compares to about 37% of all possible eligible students employed for the years 2006 – 2008. This means that has grown by more than one third in the last five years.

For the students and families that actually enrolled in the school to work effort, the employment outcomes are much higher. Following, are the reported percent employed (jobs at exit) each year of those students who enrolled in the transition initiative.

- 2006 57%
- 2007 66%
- 2008 71%

●	2009	53%
●	2010	44%
●	2011	45%
●	2012	65%
●	2013	66%
●	2014	64%

This means King County School-to-Work has improved the percentage of students exiting school with jobs, and increased significantly the number of and percentage of students served.

Participants work approximately an average of 11 hours weekly and earn an average of \$10.22 an hour. These data show increasing outcomes since the great recession of 2008 and 2009. In addition, King County outcomes compare very favorably to other counties in Washington, based on statewide data.

These numbers provide an important benchmark. In addition to documentation from King County and the State of Washington, I have also reviewed national data sets. It is difficult to find exact comparable data sets given the King County focus on youth expected to be eligible for developmental disability services as adults. One data set (Braddock, Hemp, & Rizzolo, 2015), while not specifically about transition, shows that approximately 19% of adults (down from 22% in 2010) with a developmental disability, who receive day services are in some kind of community employment. The National Core Indicators show about 13% of adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities have community jobs. It is clear, however, that King County is delivering valuable transition to employment outcomes for youth with developmental disabilities compared to other states, to other counties in Washington and compared to its own history.

## Evaluation Observations

Following are my evaluation observations organized in the three basic questions of this external evaluation. Those questions are: What's Working? What's Not Working? What's Next? Appendix 1 provides 'word clouds' highlighting the most common responses across participants (in a word cloud, more frequently mentioned ideas appear in larger fonts).

## WHAT'S WORKING?

"School-to-Work really still is the thing to do."

Three features of School-to-Work in King County continue to be central to its success. These are: continued clarity of vision and mission; collaboration of KCDDD, DDA, VR Vendors, and Schools; and leadership from King County DDD personnel. There are additional features that are clearly working, yet these three components are especially important contributors to the

successes of the last ten years. Overall, it is quite clear that the fundamental structures and methods of School-to-Work in King County are sound.

### **Expanded Vision and Mission**

“Even higher expectations.”

Vision and Mission continue to be important concepts in KC S2W. Indeed, many stakeholders spoke to the expanded vision and mission. This vision now includes the intention to serve an even higher percentage of students leaving school with a job, and also serving more students with high support needs. In addition, this vision includes greater attention and work to serving student from multicultural families. These are ambitious plans, in that the Vision encompasses greater numbers, greater quality, and greater diversity.

### **King County Leadership**

“The philosophy really matters in King County.”

King County remains a central and important hub of School-to-Work. The continued leadership shown by investing county funds promotes the continued and expanding collaborations of all the partners. The coordination aspect of the county’s work, with families, vendors, case managers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and schools remains an important hub for connecting partners and solving problems. King County personnel have been important in both providing and organizing technical assistance to stakeholders.

### **Investment in Youth with Higher Support Needs**

Creating an emphasis on including students with higher support needs was noted as a need five years ago. A small number of these students are served for an additional year, funded at a higher rate, and includes person centered planning. It also includes focused technical assistance. These features help address the concern expressed five years ago about whether “all really means all”. Overall, approximately twice as many students with high support needs are included than ten years ago.

### **Expanded Outreach to Families**

“Open Doors really helped our family.”

Reaching out to families, in partnership with schools, is a critical first step in engaging youth and families. This outreach has been important and has enabled KC S2W to reach a higher percentage of those eligible.

Transition fairs, individual orientations, other discussions and individual conversations with families continue to create a vision of employment for families. The transition fairs continue to be an important vehicle for informing students and families and recruiting participation. Microsoft has become involved in hosting Transition Fairs and participation of youth and families has nearly doubled compared to earlier years.

Family advocacy organizations continue to be very important in communications with families. The Arc of King County, the King County Parent Coalition, and more recently, Open Doors for Multicultural Families, are helping develop a culture of the expectations of work for more families. Open Doors, in particular, is helping KC S2W to begin to address the emerging multicultural issues in education and transition, as the demographics of King County become more multicultural over time.

### **Provider Commitment and Expertise**

“There are such strong values among the vendors.”

King County has a long and rich history of innovative providers of supported employment services and outcomes. This includes willingness and ability to secure jobs for people with more significant disabilities. While there has been some concern expressed about unevenness in this area and some initial reluctance on the part of some, the commitment of providers as a whole to do everything possible to serve all students is evident, and helps produce valued outcomes for young people coming out of school. Indeed, schools, case managers, VR counselors and families all speak to the importance of quality service providers or vendors of employment services.

### **School Districts Commitment**

“When it works well, you can see how invested the teachers are.”

As noted in 2010, Transition has been a focus of Special Education law for decades. Schools have long had Individual Transition Plans and have responsibility in transition services. However, less common is a schools focus on specific employment outcomes and in full cooperation with the adult service system. For schools, this has meant allowing and supporting the presence of adult service personnel in their schools and adjusting the schedules of students to provide for job exploration and work experience. Five districts continue to have ‘embedded’ adult employment agency staff. There is some agreement that more schools should have embedded employment staff. Some find the “embedded” arrangements provide for better continuity in transition services. However, others find that having multiple vendors provides more choices for families and can make vendors even better. Of the 20 school districts in King County, 19 are participating in KC S2W.

## Full Collaboration Across All Partners

“This is a five way win: Young people and families; providers; the county; vocational rehabilitation; and schools.”

Many partners point to good collaboration as central to the successes of School-to-Work in King County. When “it works well” partners point out the contributions and commitment of DDA case managers, VR counselors, vendors, family advocates, as well as County personnel. While there is concern about “unevenness” across collaborators, as was noted five years ago, there are multiple examples that demonstrate the effectiveness of this collaboration. Evidence of the collaboration and enthusiasm for School-to-Work in King County was evident at the 10 year Celebration event in October 2015. More than 250 participated, including more than 50 youth and families.

## The Blended and Flexible Funding Approach

“The county funding matters.”

Clearly, the continued use of multiple funding sources is working, and provides a basis for King County’s high percentage of youth engagement. Shared commitment to funding further reinforces the shared vision and commitment to outcomes. The funding structure, with King County providing initial fund, and holding sources of funding for paying vendors has clearly been workable for a decade. The addition of youth with higher support needs has become more possible by making adjustment to the funding approach for these students.

Together, these features of King County School-to-Work account for much of the success to date. Vision, leadership, family outreach, vendor and schools investment, collaboration of the partners, and the funding strategies, are important contributors to the successes to date and the potential for the future.

## What’s Not Working?

There continue to be many things that are working in King County to deliver employment outcomes for young people with developmental disabilities leaving high school. The groundwork remains in place for a long term commitment to these outcomes. The collaborators continue to work together and generate valued outcomes. However, all is not perfect and a number of points emerged in response to the question, “What’s Not Working?” Actually, this is not so much about things “not working” as it is “things could be even better, if .....

## Need for Stability and Increased Capacity

“We are still working on All means All.”

School-to-Work in King County has grown by one third in the last five years, serving many more youth and families. Vendor capacity, in particular, has had to grow considerably. In light of staff turnover issues, it is important to ask questions about the needed capacity and stability going forward. All partners, including the employment vendors, have stepped up to the task to deliver transition outcomes. Having said that, it is also important to ask what will be necessary to sustain growth intended for the future, as well as insure stability of the partnerships. Some expressed concern that additional employment vendors are needed. This raises questions about the need to review the finance and payment structure of School-to-Work. It will be important to consider increasing capacity with current providers, as well as with possible new providers.

## Staff Changes

“Turnover is a worry for the whole network.”

Staff turnover in vendors, schools, VR, and case management is a fact, and a part of the nature of this work. Retirements, other opportunities, and pay scales, all contribute to changes in staff. And, each of the partners is committed to onboarding new staff as effectively as possible. None the less, staff changes effect individuals and families, the relationships among partners, as well as the capacity of each partner to expand. This concern has implications for future plans and design for training and technical assistance.

## Enough Working Hours Weekly?

“We need to improve in the number of hours people are working.”

An increasing number of young people are leaving school with paid employment. However, the average number of hours worked weekly is 11 hours (compared to 14, in 2010.) As noted in 2010, a number of different responses have been offered to understand this low average of hours worked. The following explanations have been offered as possible. First, the economic downturn of 2008 to the present means it is much more difficult to find employment and to find employment of a substantial number of hours for young people with developmental disabilities. Second, working a small number of hours in one’s first job experience is not uncommon for young people who do not have disabilities and may come as little surprise for students with disabilities. Third, because more students with very significant disabilities have been included to some extent, a small number of hours worked is actually a significant accomplishment for some young people that likely would have been left out entirely in the past. Fourth, the amount of service hours available and funded may be suppressing the number of hours worked weekly. And, fifth, more recently, the fact that all individuals with a paid job



(regardless of the number of hours), will be eligible for a waiver (assuming DDA eligibility). All of these explanations individually and in combination are plausible. A small number of hours spent working each week also means families must plan for the other hours of a young person's day and week. While the path forward on this issue is not immediately clear, the concern is noteworthy, and worthy of county wide discussion.

### **Unevenness and Some Confusion about Processes**

"It's all about the job coach and if they click with my son."

As was true five years ago concern is expressed about unevenness in implementation of transition services. Schools suggested unevenness in the nature and quality of the services of employment vendors. Vendors cited unevenness on the part of schools. Some noted that families were highly varied in their understanding of, commitment to, and focus on transition outcomes. Some noted that case managers might be fully committed to transition while others were not convinced of the appropriateness of the transition emphasis. Vocational Rehabilitation was noted by some as extremely helpful and productive in creating outcomes, while others indicated this was less the case. Families note unevenness from schools, VR and providers.

Unevenness is not necessarily bad news in as much as it means there are instances of high quality in addition to instances of lesser quality. At a minimum, unevenness can mean that new exemplars emerge and a new standard is set for quality and reliability in every role associated with transition in the county. It will be important to understand the exemplars in King County in order improve outcomes across the county.

In addition, in combination with staff changes, some confusion or uncertainties have been expressed about the flow charts and processes of School-to-Work. This suggests a possible review, or a re-introduction of the roles and processes of School –to- Work. This may also suggest a review of current and future plans for training and technical assistance.

### **Timelines for each Years' Cohorts, Beginning and Ending**

"June is kind of a mess."

Summer becomes an intense time period because one year's cohort of young people are transitioning to adulthood, at the same time a new cohort of young people are ramping up into the School-to-Work process. While the calendar cannot be adjusted per se, it may be possible to develop some process review and improvements that make the summer months more manageable. This also has implications for the funding structure and design, particularly related to vendor reimbursement.

## Multicultural Focus

“Sometimes families don’t understand.”

Five years ago, questions were raised about minority participation. Since then, more attention has been given to diversity and multicultural issues. Five years ago, this concern was hard to assess and yet was agreed to be needed in the transition discussion going forward, asking questions about the amount and effectiveness of methods of reaching into traditionally under-represented groups in King County. King County has now begun to include more individuals from multicultural families, which has resulted in beginning to notice and better understand the scope of the need to adjust practices to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of these families with youth in transition. Overall, King County is much more aware of this need and opportunity. Work with multicultural families and communities will become even more important in the next decades as population demographics continue to change.

## COMMENTARY

Despite the successes, and perhaps because of, the successes of School-to-Work in King County, concern and ideas for improvement are offered about:

- consistency across all stakeholders,
- starting as early as is feasible with families,
- the capacity of the system to expand and continue to improve,
- family and multicultural involvement and communication,
- familiarity of all parties with the School-to-Work processes and timelines.

Overall, given the continued success of School-to-Work in King County, it is quite clear there is nothing wrong with School to Work in King County that can’t be fixed by what’s right about School to Work in King County.

## What’s Next?

All of the stakeholders in King County have ideas for the future. Following are ideas that emerged from stakeholders for moving forward with the continuous process of improving transition outcomes in King County.

## **Re-Connect All Partners on a Regular Basis**

“I never want to let a partner down.”

A number of stakeholders indicated the need to make sure the entire School-to-Work network stays connected to each other. This suggests events, forums, training and/or other kinds of gatherings that facilitate the exchange of information, opportunities for problem solving, investing in relationships, celebrating successes, and valuing and supporting each other’s work. Since the 2008 – 2009 recession, it has been difficult across the country to sustain the events and gatherings that keep people and agencies connected. The need, for this reconnecting has re-emerged in the county, and creates an important opportunity to re-introduce School to Work to all stakeholders. How this reconnecting might be designed and implemented is an important conversation in the coming months.

## **Review, Revise and Re-Introduce the Flow Charts, Processes**

Ten years of experience provides validation of the overall design and implementation of School-to-Work in the county. None the less, a review of the flow charts, processes, and paperwork may well accomplish two things. First, process improvements may be possible because stakeholder organizations are familiar with them. Second, such a review provides an important opportunity to make sure that all stakeholders understand the design and processes in the same way. This is especially important given the staff changes that have taken place over the years in most parts of the School-to-Work network.

## **Review the Current Use and Possible Expansion of Planning with Families**

Overall, the county has responded to the call to “start earlier”. At the same time, families continue to express the need to be as informed as possible, and prepared for the School to Work years of their young adults. This also suggests a review of the timelines and processes for family involvement, including attention to multicultural issues. In addition, a number of stakeholders noted the need for a greater and renewed investment in person centered planning and in benefits planning where feasible.

## **Expand Focus on Multicultural Family Involvement**

Five years ago, concern was expressed that a number of groups were under-represented among those participating. This raised the question about the need for a specific effort to reach out to the many minority communities in King County. In recent years, Open Doors for Multicultural Families has emerged resulting in an additional resource for families, in addition to the Arc of King County and the Parent Coalition. As the demographics of King County continue to change, added attention to, outreach, and education on multicultural issues, will be important.

## **Review Blended Funding and Financial Structure**

“I worry about the funding.”

The basic structure of the blended funding arrangement has been in place for a decade and is clearly a part of King County’s overall success. The adjusted funding for students with high support needs has been added. Having said that, the economic and business context of King County is different than 2004 when the structure was created. As such, a review of the funding arrangements and levels can confirm and/or revise features for continued success.

## **Review and Re-Plan Capacity to Deliver**

“We all focus on the outcomes.”

A thirty percent growth in recent years is significant, with nearly 65% of youth exiting schools engaging in School-to-Work transition. At the same time, others are asking “What about the other 35% not engaging”? As noted earlier, this raises questions about capacity to deliver in all roles. How can vendor capacity be expanded? Are more vendors needed? What about the capacity of case managers to increase investment? What about Vocational Rehabilitation? What about family advocacy and multicultural focus? What about the investments going forward, including person centered planning, and benefits planning, in addition to overall coordination? This is an important conversation going forward about the kind of capacity needed by each partner, and by all partners in collaboration.

This also provides the opportunity to assess the current and needed investment in training and technical assistance that may be needed by each of the S2W partners in the years ahead, in the interest of expansion and continued improvement.

## **SUMMARY**

Transition outcomes in King County credibly rival or exceed the outcomes in the country. Leadership, clarity of vision and mission, ownership by all stakeholders, and quality coordination are major components of the successes to date. The enthusiasm and commitment of all stakeholders remains high after a full decade. At the same time, stakeholders have clearly indicated their interest in further expansion as well as ongoing improvement of outcomes. A decade of success provides an important opportunity for the S2W partners to make new plans for the next decade.

## References

Braddock, D., Hemp, R., Rizzolo, M.C., Tanis, E.S., Haffer, L., & Wu, J. (2015) *The State of the States in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: Emerging from the Great Recession*. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado. Department of Psychiatry and Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities.

National Core Indicators (February 2013). *Data Brief. Working in the Community: the Status and Outcomes of People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Integrated Employment – an Update*

## What's Working?



## What's Not Working?





## What's Next?

