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Research BRIEF

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Many Hands Make Employment Work: Collaborations Between VR Agencies and Workforce Development Boards to Provide Work-Based Learning Experiences

Many federal, state, and local policymakers are seeking ways to meet recent federal requirements for serving students with disabilities. These policymakers may benefit from learning how others have collaborated successfully to improve service delivery for this population. This report provides two examples of collaborations between state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and local workforce development boards to deliver programs that offer work-based learning experiences (WBLEs) to students with disabilities. The first example, Texas's Summer Earn and Learn program, offers summer WBLEs through a partnership between the VR agency and workforce development boards. The second example, the Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income project in Arkansas, is a model demonstration project for youth that combined resources from the VR agency and workforce development boards to provide summer WBLEs as part of a broader set of services.

Although the policy environment lends itself to cross-agency collaboration in the delivery of services to youth, this report identifies several challenges associated with these types of initiatives, such as administrative hurdles and difficulty fitting the initiative to the missions of each partner agency. The two programs featured in this report evolved in similar ways, facing barriers and adopting solutions that might help other agencies considering similar initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Many federal, state, and local policymakers are seeking ways to address recent federal requirements for serving students with disabilities. These policymakers may benefit from learning how others have collaborated successfully to improve service delivery to this population. Collaborating provides an opportunity to bring many hands together to make employment work and solve a problem that all of the partners face. As a result, they can make the best use of existing (and limited) resources, increase service provision, and improve both youth and program outcomes.

This report presents two examples of collaborations between state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and local workforce development boards to deliver programs that provide work-based learning experiences (WBLEs) to students with disabilities. We emphasize VR agencies and workforce development boards because they are the primary providers of WBLEs for youth. The first example, Texas's Summer Earn and Learn (SEAL) program, offers summer WBLEs through a partnership between the Texas Workforce Commission, the VR agency, and 28 workforce development boards. The second example, the Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) project in Arkansas, is a model

demonstration project for youth that combined resources from the VR agency and workforce development boards to offer summer work experiences to youth as part of a broader set of services. We also present key features of the two programs in a framework developed for policymakers to help them select, develop, and adapt initiatives for their contexts (Honeycutt et al. 2018b).

Although the policy environment lends itself to cross-agency collaboration in delivering services to youth, this report identifies several challenges associated with these types of initiatives. For example, any new cross-agency initiative must fit the missions of each partner, and it should lead to outcomes that are desired by all involved, including the youth. Administrative issues, including staff roles and responsibilities, management and staffing, and payment schedules, might also be important factors— and obstacles—when implementing a new initiative.

The two collaborations discussed in this report evolved in similar ways, facing barriers and adopting strategies to overcome them that might be helpful for other agencies considering similar initiatives. In both collaborations, the partners conducted strategic planning sessions to prepare for service provision and held debriefing meetings after each round of implementation to identify what worked well, what did not, and what to change for the next round. The stakeholders in these collaborations emphasized the value of communication, role clarity, and staff training as well as the need for strong leaders to bring partners and their staff together to work toward a common goal. Also, each collaboration provided funding for dedicated staff to administer the work experiences, and each developed written documentation to define cross-partner policies and responsibilities. These factors suggest that simply braiding existing funds and resources may not be sufficient when bringing together many hands for collaboration. Policymakers might also need to contribute new resources—staff, funding, and training—to develop and maintain work experience programs for youth with disabilities.

State VR agencies offer employment and training services to people with disabilities who are interested in working, including transition-age youth. These services can include work preparation, job search and placement services, postsecondary education, rehabilitation technology, and help with accommodations. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) required VR agencies to offer pre-employment transition services specifically designed for students in secondary and post-secondary education, which expanded the VR agency's involvement with this population. VR agencies frequently partner with local education agencies, community rehabilitation providers, and workforce development boards to deliver pre-employment transition services.

Workforce development boards—community-based centers that bring together multiple programs that provide job, education, and training services—have many different names: American Job Centers, one-stop centers, workforce boards, and workforce development centers. They are intended to be one-stop locations where people and employers can access the various programs and services offered by all workforce partners (Holcomb et al. 2018). Besides programs serving the general public, the boards include programs for specific or at-risk populations, including transition-age youth and people with disabilities. Under the WIOA, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) shifted its youth programs, which are accessed through workforce development boards, to emphasize serving out-of-school rather than in-school youth, and it allocated a portion of funding to cover paid and unpaid work experiences for youth.

WHAT IS COLLABORATION?

Interagency collaboration is a critical aspect of the supports needed to help youth make the transition from school to work. It is cited in the *Guideposts to Success* (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth 2009), which summarizes best practices related to youth with disabilities and successful transition, and it is part of various services and programs serving youth with disabilities, such as Project SEARCH (Müller and VanGilder 2014). The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT), which compiles data on effective transition practices, lists collaboration as a promising practice to help youth achieve their education and employment goals (NTACT 2018).

From the VR perspective, collaboration is an important skill for VR counselors and their partners involved in serving youth, though many gaps remain in our knowledge about this practice (Oertle and Seader 2015). From the workforce perspective, interagency collaboration is a feature of DOL initiatives such as Employment First and the Disability Employment Initiative. Several technical assistance centers involved in employment or youth transition, such as the LEAD Center (2018), ExploreVR (Ford et al. 2017), and the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (2018a), feature best practices for collaboration.

Collaborations between state and local agencies that provide services to youth is a fundamental aspect of WIOA (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2018; DOL 2018; U.S. Department of Education 2015). The increased emphasis on collaboration and integrated service delivery manifests in several ways. For example, partners in the workforce development system, which include workforce programs and VR agencies, must develop a combined state plan every four years. These partners must identify people who are concurrently served by two or more of their programs and report on a set of common performance accountability measures to track the people's employment, earnings, and skill gains after program completion.

Although collaboration has many benefits, it also presents several notable challenges. Working with a new partner can involve a steep learning curve to understand the partner's systems and service offerings. It can also be difficult to understand each partner's technical language or other day-to-day functions. Without a mutual understanding of these core characteristics and language, partners may be subject to miscommunication.

Below, we identify collaboration-related lessons from the Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) and other PROMISE projects. Sites involved in these two demonstrations provided a range of vocational and other services—often through collaborations between many stakeholders—to hard-to-serve youth who had major health conditions. For example, one YTD site in New York City made summer employment programs a key service for its youth (Fraker et al. 2011). The lessons that emerged from these two demonstrations might therefore be useful for policymakers who wish to pursue similar collaborations. The information comes from a report that describes the implementation of the YTD projects (Martinez et al. 2010) and from the YTD evaluation design report (Rangarajan et al. 2009), along with two group interviews conducted with administrators from five PROMISE projects (including Arkansas PROMISE).

1. Strong partnerships can be instrumental in serving youth.

The YTD projects involved many agencies as part of their service models, largely because they wanted to capitalize on the strengths of the various agencies, minimize deficiencies for other agencies, and expand access to employment supports. The strengths leveraged through these collaborations included experience working with youth, good track records of working together on other efforts, and existing organizational and service infrastructures. For PROMISE, collaborations were an integral part of all projects, as the U.S. Department of Education required the involvement of specific state stakeholders.

2. Collaboration requires early and ongoing communication and data sharing.

Communication and data sharing between all partners can help mitigate potential challenges introduced by collaboration. These activities enable staff to identify youth who are being offered services, along with details about the services received. Finding youth who are not receiving services from the collaborative effort can help staff reach those who are slipping through the cracks. Staff may also be able to streamline services when youth are eligible for help from several partners in the collaboration, avoiding service duplication. Furthermore, communication and data sharing can help staff at different organizations break through silos to connect youth to services, particularly when such efforts are encouraged from the top down. In one PROMISE project, for example, communication with local education agencies was important for facilitating access to youth and staff.

3. Piloting programs can improve effectiveness.

By first piloting their service offerings, staff can identify issues in the service delivery model. For a collaboration to be most effective, staff need time to develop relationships, draft protocols, and iron out kinks in the service model. A pilot period, which typically involves a smaller-scale implementation of the model, can give staff a chance to develop this familiarity and refine the model at lower risk than with a full-scale rollout. For example, the original YTD sites encountered challenges that could have been identified and addressed with earlier piloting of their models; the experimental component of YTD involved piloting five projects and then selecting three for random-assignment implementation based on observations made during the pilot.[1]

Although piloting requires time and money, this initial investment is often worth the effort because it enables staff to ensure that the intervention will be as impactful as possible and to resolve any problems. For example, during the YTD pilots, project staff found that the services provided by partners were the weakest part of the intervention, and they had a chance to identify and correct the issues. If issues occur during full-scale implementation, the intervention may be less effective, leading to little improvement in outcomes for youth. It is always unfortunate to find no improvement in outcomes, but implementation issues make this problem worse—evaluators then cannot tell whether the lack of impacts stems from an ineffective service model or from improper implementation. As a result, the findings of the evaluation (and the investment associated with it) are less useful.

4. Offering services in several sites is complicated but feasible.

Both YTD and PROMISE offered similar packages of services across multiple geographic areas. But even within a single site, youth were often geographically dispersed, necessitating creative approaches to delivering services. Collaborations can result in staff expanding their service offerings into locations where they had not yet offered services. In targeting new areas, staff might want to be mindful of differences in culture and local service environments. Good communication and piloting programs can be critical to managing the challenges of serving youth across several sites. In YTD, for instance, centralized management systems and effective coordination and communication between partners helped ensure that the challenges related to offering services in multiple locations were addressed.

5. Written agreements can define roles and expectations.

PROMISE projects benefited from written documents that clearly defined the roles and responsibilities of partner organizations. These documents included memoranda of understanding, cooperative agreements, interagency agreements, and other formal and informal agreements that documented the staff, activities, timing, funding, and other resources that partners would deliver for the projects. This type of documentation reflects a more formal and complex level of collaboration between partners and establishes expectations for all involved.

WHAT ARE WBLES?

A WBLE is an "educational approach or instructional methodology that uses the workplace or real work to provide students with the knowledge and skills that will help them connect school experiences to real-life work activities and future career opportunities" (Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center 2018c). It is one of five pre-employment transition services that state VR agencies must provide to students with disabilities, according to the WIOA (Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center 2018b).

WBLEs can take many forms, including internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, informational interviews, volunteering, and paid employment. The other four pre-employment transition services are job-exploration counseling, workplace-readiness training, counseling on post-secondary enrollment, and instruction in self-advocacy. The rationale behind the focus on pre-employment transition services is that providing strong exposure to careers while in high school can better prepare students with disabilities for employment after they leave high school. State VR agencies must spend at least

15 percent of their federal funding on pre-employment transition services. This number represents a major investment on the part of agencies, given that about 80 percent of their funding is federal.

A large body of research supports the connection between WBLEs and later successful outcomes. Several correlational studies that document this include Carter et al. (2012), Mazzotti et al. (2016), and Test et al. (2009). Other research on transition programs shows that receipt of more work experiences or job-related services, either at the individual or program levels, is associated with better long-term employment outcomes (Luecking et al. 2018; Fraker et al. 2014; Mamun et al. 2018). NTACT (2018) also states that paid employment and work experiences have evidence of success for improving outcomes. However, NTACT's definition of work experiences differs from the WBLEs for pre-employment transition services in that the employer must pay the youth's wages, not the program, and wages must be competitive.

CASE EXAMPLE 1: TEXAS'S SEAL PROGRAM

The Texas SEAL program engages students ages 14 to 22 who have disabilities and are in secondary and postsecondary education, offering them paid work experiences during the summer. It stresses work readiness and paid work over the summer when students are not in school. SEAL combines two of the WIOA-mandated pre-employment transition services: work-readiness training and WBLEs. The program is intended to help students develop skills; gain work experience; and learn about job opportunities in different industries, particularly for in-demand jobs—all of which should help them navigate the transition from school to work.

SEAL meets the WIOA requirement of spending 15 percent of Texas's federal VR grant (over $40 million of its $278 million grant in 2017) to deliver pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities throughout the state. Texas's VR Division was committed to using part of this funding to develop a program that included WBLEs; its rationale is that research and anecdotal evidence consistently show that paid work experience is valuable because students gain exposure to real work environments and receive monetary compensation.

SEAL involves partnerships between several organizations:

- **The state workforce agency (Texas Workforce Commission [TWC]).** TWC is the state agency that administers all six WIOA core programs and oversees the Texas Workforce Solutions Network, which is itself composed of staff at TWC, 28 workforce development boards, and their contracted service providers and community partners. The commission provided leadership and support for the development of SEAL.

- **TWC's VR Division.** As the entity responsible for administering the delivery of VR services across the state, including pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities, TWC's VR Division led the implementation of SEAL, in partnership with the workforce development boards. The VR Division contracts with boards to conduct work-readiness trainings and WBLEs. It also provides per-participant payments to workforce development boards for defined SEAL deliverables. Among other tasks, TWC VR counselors make student referrals, conduct case management, and provide support services to SEAL participants. TWC VR staff also provide information to workforce development on employers that have previously worked with the VR program.

- **The local workforce development boards and their contractors.** Workforce development boards administer WIOA programs funded under Titles I and III, along with numerous other programs in the Texas Workforce Solutions Network. These boards use their existing and new relationships with employers and providers to place SEAL participants in work experiences.

- **One-stop centers.** The 186 one-stop centers, known in Texas as Workforce Solutions Offices, publicize SEAL in the centers and through their community networks. In many areas, the contractors that run Workforce Solutions Offices also serve as the contractor for SEAL and therefore have primary responsibility for direct service delivery for the program.

The VR Division chose this collaborative approach to SEAL so that it could draw on the strengths of each partner. For example, staff at the VR Division had the skills and knowledge to work with students with disabilities and to arrange for employer accommodations. But although the division had strong relationships with some large employers, those relationships were not plentiful enough to provide WBLEs for all of the students it wanted to reach. The workforce development boards could fill this gap; they had an established infrastructure at the local level that included relationships with many large and small employers. The VR counselors could in turn fill gaps in cases where workforce development board contractors lacked the training or experience to serve students with disabilities.

SEAL successfully placed students into WBLEs during its first two years of operation. The VR Division used U.S. Census data on the number of youth with disabilities in each area to set WBLE targets for each board. In its first year, SEAL placed 1,500 students in WBLEs. Building on this success, TWC expanded the program in its second year, placing over 2,400 students in summer 2018. TWC intends to place 2,500 students in summer 2019 and in each subsequent summer.

1. Facilitators of collaboration

SEAL stakeholders identified three factors that helped them launch and sustain the program:

Programs collaborating under the same umbrella organization. In 2016, the two VR agencies in Texas (General and Blind) were transferred from the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services to TWC, in response to the 84th Texas Legislature's Senate Bill 208. With that transfer, a single agency—TWC—began overseeing all core WIOA programs in Texas. In 2017, TWC combined the two legacy VR agencies into one VR Division and began to physically move local TWC VR staff into Workforce Solutions Offices so that they would be co-located with workforce staff. These administrative and physical moves resulted in TWC becoming a one-stop shop for all of the state's WIOA programs. For leaders and staff, these changes motivated them to find ways to collaborate and improve their relationships, without the burden of typical cross-agency barriers.

Committed leaders at all levels. Leaders who are committed to a program are especially important for its development. Commitment by leaders evolved somewhat organically in Texas. First, the VR Division's director had substantial experience working in local workforce programs before her career with VR, giving her an understanding and respect for workforce programs and the state and local leaders of the Workforce Solutions system. Second, prior collaborations between workforce development boards and VR were positive, suggesting that further efforts could be worthwhile. Board leaders and local VR managers embraced the opportunities presented by SEAL, which was essential for the program's implementation. Finally, after VR moved to TWC, the Commission immediately looked for ways to expand services to students with disabilities and to meaningfully integrate the VR Division with other TWC programs to keep it from being isolated.

Clear communication between partners. Given the many partners and staff involved in SEAL, clear communication was important for implementing SEAL efficiently. Although the different players all had the same goals, early communication helped delineate their different roles and responsibilities. The VR Division established roles that reflected the partners' relative strengths, and documentation and continued conversations helped ensure that all stakeholders understood their roles and responsibilities. These conversations occurred both at the state level and within each local community and included VR Division staff, board staff, and local contractors. At the state level, having a single point person between the VR Division and the boards facilitated consistent communication across the state.

2. Challenges to collaboration

Staff identified two challenges they encountered when collaborating on SEAL:

A short time to launch. All staff we interviewed said that the time between January 2017 (when efforts to develop SEAL started in earnest) and June 2017 (when the program launched) was too

short to accomplish all that needed to be done. One respondent said that partners were able to overcome this challenge only because of the "all hands on deck" commitment from leaders and service staff. The partners addressed this challenge in the second year by starting the planning process at the beginning of the school year.

Many collaborators across a large state. The collaborations for SEAL required teamwork both at the state level (across the VR, Workforce, and administrative divisions within TWC) and locally (between local VR offices, workforce development boards, board contractors, and employers). The workforce system in Texas is large, with 28 workforce development boards that each contract with local providers for services. Collaboration across these levels was important for developing a consistent program in all locations. TWC also funded a full-time program specialist at the state office to provide year-round support for SEAL; this person facilitated ongoing communication between boards and TWC VR staff.

🔆 3. Lessons for developing similar initiatives

Stakeholders noted that they used the knowledge they gained from the first year of SEAL to expand the program. They identified the following lessons for others interested in pursuing a similar collaboration model:

- **Allow a generous planning runway.** Many of the challenges of launching a new program can be overcome with additional time. Extra time might be particularly helpful when building a relationship with a new partner; it would give both parties a chance to get to know each other, see how each other functions, and learn about each other's service approaches. Additional time might also be needed to train staff on the program and to reach out to employers, who themselves may need to learn about the program and how to incorporate people who are students or have significant disabilities into their workplaces.

- **Have honest conversations at the local level early in the planning stage.** Planning conversations between local partners can help those involved develop an understanding of the customers, labor markets, school systems, and available employers. Partners can also use these conversations to establish the roles and responsibilities of the different staff who are involved.

- **Invest in training.** The contractors for many workforce development boards may not have worked with large numbers of clients—especially young clients—with significant disabilities. In Texas, the boards and their contractors varied in their resources and staff turnover. Staff training can address these issues and level the playing field across boards and contractors. Training can build staff awareness about the interests and skills of students with disabilities who wish to pursue meaningful careers. In Texas, the VR Division learned that written training and resource materials for contractors would be helpful. For the 2018 program, the division developed an online Board Requirements Manual that included guidance on implementing SEAL. For the 2019 program, the VR Division is considering more strategies for providing additional training and resource materials for the boards and their contractors.

- **Build capacity.** Some workforce development boards and contractors involved in SEAL found it problematic to add staff for the summer program and then reduce staff at the end of summer. Building capacity to maintain year-round staff could help avoid such problems.

CASE EXAMPLE 2: ARKANSAS PROMISE'S SUMMER WORK EXPERIENCES

Arkansas PROMISE offered summer work experiences to youth as part of a comprehensive set of transition services and supports. The project, for recipients of Supplemental Security Income who were ages 14 through 16 at enrollment, was one of six across the United States that provided educational, vocational, and other services to youth and their families and sought to improve service coordination between state and local agencies (Honeycutt et al. 2018a). It enrolled 2,000 youth into the project, with half receiving Arkansas PROMISE services and half receiving services as usual.

It was administered by the Arkansas Department of Education through the University of Arkansas and operated in 25 of the state's 75 counties, serving youth and their families in five regions.

The U.S. Department of Education, which funded PROMISE, required all PROMISE projects to deliver certain services to youth. Specifically, these projects were to offer youth "at least one paid work experience in an integrated setting while [youth were] enrolled in high school, along with other career preparation and work-based experiences provided in integrated settings" (U.S. Department of Education 2013). Arkansas PROMISE chose to fulfill this requirement through an initiative offering paid summer work experiences. It also provided four additional services to youth and their families: (1) case management and monthly trainings on transition and employment issues, provided by 50 case managers; (2) vocational evaluations and career-readiness training provided by 10 transition specialists employed by the state VR agency; (3) a summer camp to promote academic readiness and social skills; and (4) benefits counseling and financial education.

Arkansas PROMISE partnered with four entities to deliver summer work experiences:

- **The state VR agency (Arkansas Rehabilitation Services).** The project contracted with the state VR agency to obtain access to 10 transition specialists, who provided career-exploration services to youth and facilitated their work experiences. These staff also facilitated youth's applications for VR services. The state VR agency paid the youth's wages as part of its WIOA requirements for pre-employment transition services.

- **The state labor department (Arkansas Department of Workforce Services).** The state labor department helped forge relationships with the local workforce development boards.

- **Local workforce development boards.** The project engaged nine local workforce development boards to implement the summer work experiences. Staff at these boards used their connections with local employers and their experiences with summer youth employment programs to help Arkansas PROMISE staff identify and develop work experiences that matched youth's interests. The project paid workforce development boards on a per-person basis for each summer work experience.

- **Community rehabilitation providers.** Through one of its partners, Arkansas PROMISE was able to engage community rehabilitation providers for job coaching and transportation services. It also hired a community rehabilitation provider to facilitate work experiences in two locations in Year 3 of the project and in another two locations the following year.

To take full advantage of the strengths of each of its partners, Arkansas PROMISE took a collaborative approach to its summer work experiences. It realized that the workforce development boards had strong local connections to employers. The state VR agency did not have these types of connections for youth employment, and it would be challenging for Arkansas PROMISE to develop such connections on its own. Also, the staff of the VR agency had experience working with youth with disabilities, and so they were in the best position to provide employment supports and training to youth and families, employers, and workforce development boards. Finally, community rehabilitation providers had already received contracts from the VR agency for job coaching services. They were thus well-positioned to offer transportation services, which Arkansas PROMISE funded because it identified such services as essential for many youth who want summer jobs.

Arkansas PROMISE expected the youth's summer work experiences to meet certain requirements. Youth had to be paid at or above minimum wage, they had to work in integrated settings, and the work had to reflect the youth's interests. This last point was critical; Arkansas PROMISE managers wanted interest-based placements, instead of having youth automatically placed in the types of jobs traditionally offered to people with disabilities (jobs involving "food, filth, and flowers"). Project staff worked with youth to identify their interests and goals for employment and to match those to community employers. Each employed youth received supplemental supports such as job coaching and transportation, as needed. In addition, beginning with the second year of the work experiences, youth received 10 hours of training directly before starting their jobs to help them prepare for the workplace.

In the third year of the project, staff began offering incentive bonuses to youth when they achieved 50, 100, 150, and 200 hours of employment; these bonuses equaled $1 for each hour worked.

As shown in the project's administrative data, the project delivered work experiences to many of the enrolled youth (Honeycutt et al. 2018a). It collected information on the summer work experiences, including assessment results, goals, and employers, from its partners. Each summer, about one-third of the project's 940 youth participants had a work experience during the first three years of operation, averaging 145 to 164 hours of work each summer. About two-thirds of the youth had a summer work experience at least once during the first three years, and almost one-quarter had a work experience in two summers (which was the project's stated goal).

1. Facilitators of collaboration

The staff of Arkansas PROMISE noted three factors that facilitated their summer work experiences:

Staff buy-in from all partners through trainings. Trainings with the staff of the partners can help align missions and activities. Each February, for example, the project convened its job coaches for a training on the summer work experiences, and all partners attended a two-day training before the experiences started to meet all of the players and to understand the initiative's values and work-flow. The leaders stressed that if a local provider was not interested in or not committed to the model, youth will be poorly served.

Early communication on budgeting, administrative issues, and roles. Arkansas PROMISE developed a flow chart showing the communication pathways for each party involved in the summer work experiences, including youth and employers. This chart helped ensure that participants followed the proper chain of command and that partners maintained their territories. For example, only staff from workforce development boards were allowed to communicate with the employer, as employers did not want to have staff from multiple organizations contacting them about a youth and because the workforce development boards typically had the relationship with the employer.

Opportunities to provide feedback and plan for the future. Arkansas PROMISE found it necessary to create opportunities for staff to learn from each other and provide feedback about the summer work experiences. During the fall, it would convene stakeholders to review the successes and challenges of the past summer's initiative and to discuss possible changes for next summer.

2. Challenges to collaboration

Arkansas PROMISE encountered three primary challenges to implementing its summer work experience model and their collaborative efforts:

Work placements that were not in line with youth's interests. As noted in Honeycutt et al. (2018a), Arkansas PROMISE could not ensure that the placements made by the workforce development board reflected youth's interests. Some board staff sought to make good matches but found that some youth's goals were unrealistic or logistically challenging, whereas other staff did not embrace the value of interest-based placements. If Arkansas PROMISE staff found employers that matched youth's interests, the boards did not always pursue these leads because of concerns about the employers not meeting the board's criteria. One reason for these responses is that the boards may have been focused on addressing immediate vocational issues and were not familiar enough with the project's goals or with working with youth who have disabilities.

In response to this challenge, the project worked to educate staff from workforce development boards about the project's employment model, the long-term goals it had for youth, and issues related to disability and employment. But despite efforts to encourage interest-based placements, the project eventually dropped its contracts with four workforce development boards and instead used a community rehabilitation provider for its summer work experiences in four areas.

Ensuring appropriate reimbursements. Arkansas PROMISE paid workforce development boards for each youth who participated in the summer work experience. However, managers antici-pated that more youth would take part than actually did, resulting in lower payments to boards than either party expected, and so the reimbursements to the boards might not have covered the costs of their involvement in the work experiences. To address the compensation gap, the project funded a year-round, full-time liaison on each board to handle tasks related to the summer work experiences. But not all boards accepted these funds or filled this position full time.

Managing services across different organizations. Arkansas PROMISE relied on staff, resources, and services from many organizations to deliver its summer work experiences (as well as other aspects of its service model). But the fact that service staff were at different organizations made it difficult to build relationships, communicate, and understand roles. In addition, managing several layers of contracts and subcontracts was complicated for the project's lead agency. Arkansas PROMISE addressed these challenges by convening frequent statewide and regional meetings and trainings that included staff who worked on various aspects of the summer work experiences.

💡 3. Lessons for developing similar initiatives

When asked about lessons for others who might be interested in pursuing a similar collaboration model, Arkansas PROMISE managers offered the following advice:

- **Establish strong cross-partner data systems.** A critical feature of Arkansas PROMISE was the system it used to collect data from partners that were helping to deliver summer work experiences. Staff used these data to plan and track youth's involvement in work experiences. Data systems that all partners can use to document services and outcomes and to observe youth's use of services can keep stakeholders informed about what is being done to whom, by whom, and when.

- **Capitalize on resources from partners.** Arkansas PROMISE relied on partners' strengths to address gaps in the implementation of its summer work experiences. When combining funds and resources from partners, project staff emphasized the need to draw on all of the resources that partners contribute, based on the initiative's requirements, as well as the strengths, missions, and values of each partner. This process requires partners to understand each other and the resources they offer.

- **Respect the underlying philosophies and purposes of each partner.** Arkansas PROMISE used a training approach to level the playing field for all partners involved and to align their service philosophies. The approach reflected a desire to avoid telling partners how to do their jobs. Policymakers could look for ways to build bridges and establish common expecta-tions through training.

ARE THESE INITIATIVES RIGHT FOR YOUR STATE?

To help federal policymakers find promising initiatives that could substantively improve employment outcomes, we developed a framework that they can use to identify their priorities for potential new interventions to serve youth with disabilities (Honeycutt et al. 2018b). The framework includes ques-tions about how potential interventions could meet policy objectives, fit within the existing landscape of supports, and ultimately have the greatest impact while remaining cost-effective and sustainable.

Exhibits 1 and 2 adapt this framework for state and local policymakers and apply it to the SEAL program and the summer work experience initiative used in Arkansas PROMISE, respectively. These frameworks present the characteristics of each collaboration for review by anyone who might wish to implement a similar initiative. Note that the leaders of these collaborations may or may not have been aware of these characteristics when they began their initiative; our intent is simply to show how each collaboration incorporated various features that policymakers may consider.

Exhibit 1. Can SEAL work for you?

Intervention characteristics	Questions for policymakers	SEAL
Refine policy objectives		
Goals	• Is the intervention consistent with the agency's mission and activities?	• The program is consistent with the TWCs mission to enhance employment outcomes and the VR Division's mission to improve the transition of students with disabilities. SEAL connects students with disabilities to WBLEs, which has been shown to improve employment outcomes.
	• How can policymakers use information obtained from the implementation and evaluation of an intervention to improve current programs and policies?	• To implement SEAL, TWC combined the existing infrastructure of state workforce development boards with that of VR counselors to connect students to WBLEs. Policymakers can learn from the processes that led to successful collaboration.
Outcomes	• In addition to substantive employment outcomes, will evidence on other outcomes be important to achieving policymakers' goals?	• The primary objective is to improve long-term employment outcomes for students with disabilities. Any positive impact on educational attainment would also be consistent with policymakers' goals.
	• Are the intervention's expected impacts on the target population all consistent with policymakers' goals?	• The summer work in which students engage as part of the program increases students' human capital, which should improve their opportunities for future employment.
Assess landscape for implementation		
Existing public program context	• How can the agency's existing investments and resources be used to support the intervention and facilitate achievement of its goals?	• TWC's VR Division uses at least 15 percent of its federal funding from the Rehabilitation Services Administration to deliver pre-employment transition services, including the workplace-readiness training and WBLE that SEAL provides.
	• Which agencies have previously invested, or are currently investing, in the funding and research of related initiatives and/or intervention(s)?	• TWC oversees the local workforce development boards, which provide services and placements to job seekers, including placements in summer work experiences for students in SEAL.
Agencies' demonstration authority	• Is any agency currently testing related interventions under its demonstration authority? Do any agencies have plans to do so?	• None noted in the state.
	• What legislative changes, if any, would be necessary to implement the initiative?	• No legislative changes were necessary to develop and implement the program. However, the WIOA mandate for state VR programs to provide pre-employment transition services served as the impetus for the program.
Apply criteria for selecting interventions		
Causal evidence	• Has the agency considered the evidence documented by the Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research, the What Works Clearinghouse, NTACT, the National Clearinghouse of Rehabilitation Training Materials, or other resources?	• WBLEs are one of five required pre-employment transition services. TWC developed SEAL to emphasize WBLEs, given the evidence linking them to future employment, including documented support for WBLEs by NTACT.
	• If evidence does not exist, how will a new evaluation produce rigorous evidence?	• TWC's VR Division is tracking statistics on SEAL but is not yet measuring the impacts of the intervention.

Intervention characteristics	Questions for policymakers	SEAL
Costs	• With respect to the demonstration, is the expected value of the information gained likely to exceed the opportunity cost of conducting the demonstration?	• Not applicable.
	• Does it make more sense for the agency to invest in initiatives that (1) have existing evidence or (2) lack causal evidence but promote innovation and creativity?	• Not applicable.
Replicability, scalability, and sustainability	• What is the likelihood that the intervention (with similar objectives) can be applied to different populations or in areas that the agency serves?	• Because the intervention leverages supports and infrastructure from both the VR Division and workforce development boards, it could be implemented in other communities.
	• How can the agency sustain the intervention at the state and local levels?	• Sustaining the intervention would require (expected) continued funding and resources for both the VR Division and the workforce development boards.
	• What additional capacities are needed for the agency to sustain the intervention?	• Sustaining the program requires maintaining and building new relationships with employers and customers, which in turn requires strong coordination and communication about expectations and fears related to working with students with disabilities.

Source: The worksheet is adapted from Honeycutt et al. (2018b). The information about SEAL draws on interviews with and documentation from program managers.

Exhibit 2. Can Arkansas PROMISE's summer work experience initiative work for you?

Intervention characteristics	Questions for policymakers	Arkansas PROMISE summer work experiences
Refine policy objectives		
Goals	• Is the intervention consistent with the agency's mission and activities?	• The intervention was built on the existing infrastructure of the youth work programs offered by state workforce development boards, in tandem with PROMISE project services, which included services that were similar to those offered by VR agencies. As such, the intervention was consistent with each partner's mission and activities.
	• How can policymakers use information obtained from the implementation and evaluation of an intervention to improve current programs and policies?	• Processes used to leverage the services of workforce development boards for work experiences can be used by policymakers interested in similar initiatives.
Outcomes	• In addition to substantive employment outcomes, will evidence on other outcomes be important to achieving policymakers' goals?	• In addition to employment, other intended outcomes for participants in the PROMISE project are improved educational attainment and decreased reliance on public programs, including Supplemental Security Income.
	• Are the intervention's expected impacts on the target population all consistent with policymakers' goals?	• Summer work experiences increase participants' human capital, which could improve their employment outcomes and decrease their reliance on public programs. These experiences have not been shown to have a direct impact on education outcomes.

Intervention characteristics	Questions for policymakers	Arkansas PROMISE summer work experiences
Assess landscape for implementation		
Existing public program context	• How can the agency's existing investments and resources be used to support the intervention and facilitate achievement of its goals?	• State entities primarily responsible for implementing Arkansas PROMISE are the state department of education and the University of Arkansas, neither of which deliver similar services as those for the PROMISE demonstration. However, the intervention was consistent with the PROMISE program model.
	• Which agencies have previously invested, or are currently investing, in the funding and research of related initiatives and/or intervention(s)?	• The state department of workforce services oversees local workforce development boards, including youth work programs. The state VR agency provides services, including WBLEs, to youth with disabilities.
Agencies' demonstration authority	• Is any agency currently testing related interventions under its demonstration authority? Do any agencies have plans to do so?	• The state VR agency oversees other transition training and employment programs for youth. When PROMISE began, the VR agency typically worked with high school students upon their graduation, but as the program was implemented, the agency began working with students earlier to comply with WIOA changes.
	• What legislative changes, if any, would be necessary to implement the initiative?	• No legislative changes were necessary. The University of Arkansas contracted with the state's department of workforce services and each local workforce development board through existing contracting mechanisms.
Apply criteria for selecting interventions		
Causal evidence	• Has the agency considered the evidence documented by the Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research, the What Works Clearinghouse, NTACT, the National Clearinghouse of Rehabilitation Training Materials, or other resources?	• The University of Arkansas designed its intervention model, including summer work experiences, based on Guideposts for Success, guidelines required by the U.S. Department of Education, and other research findings.
	• If evidence does not exist, how will a new evaluation produce rigorous evidence?	• The evaluation of Arkansas PROMISE will reveal whether the overall project had an impact on youth outcomes and the extent of participation in summer work experiences. It will not identify the specific impact of these experiences on youth outcomes.
Costs	• With respect to the demonstration, is the expected value of the information gained likely to exceed the opportunity cost of conducting the demonstration?	• Not applicable.
	• Does it make more sense for the agency to invest in initiatives that (1) have existing evidence or (2) lack causal evidence but promote innovation and creativity?	• Not applicable.
Replicability, scalability, and sustainability	• What is the likelihood that the intervention (with similar objectives) can be applied to different populations or in areas that the agency serves?	• Because the intervention draws on supports and infrastructure from both VR agencies and workforce development boards, it could be implemented in other states and communities.
	• How can the agency sustain the intervention at the state and local levels?	• Sustaining the summer work experience initiative would require additional funding and resources from both the VR agency and the local workforce development board.
	• What additional capacities are needed for the agency to sustain the intervention?	• Sustaining the intervention would require additional training and technical assistance supports for youth, workforce development board staff, and job coaches.

Source: The worksheet is adapted from Honeycutt et al. (2018b). The information about Arkansas PROMISE draws on interviews with and documentation from program managers, and the Arkansas PROMISE process report (Honeycutt et al. 2018a).

> **Methods.** To inform this report, we conducted telephone interviews with staff familiar with the featured programs and reviewed published information about each program.
>
> - We conducted three interviews with five TWC staff, one interview with the program director of Arkansas PROMISE, and two interviews with five administrators of PROMISE projects (including the director of Arkansas PROMISE). We used these interviews to collect information on program operations, successes and challenges, and lessons for others pursuing collaborative efforts.
>
> - We reviewed published information on the featured programs: SEAL regulations (Texas Workforce Commission 2018) and a process evaluation report from the Arkansas PROMISE evaluation (Honeycutt et al. 2018a).

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ENDNOTES

[1] Three YTD projects from the non-experimental phase were selected by SSA for random assignment implementation.