

Program Snapshot: Bridges from School to Work

By Jody Schimmel Hyde and Katie Bodenlos

Bridges from School to Work (Bridges) helps young adults (ages 17 to 24) with disabilities find work as they transition out of high school. The program typically serves students in special education in their last year of high school or just after they finish high school. Young adults are eligible for Bridges if they have (1) an interest in work, (2) the ability to travel to and from a job, and (3) the ability to work independently at a job.

Bridges has served young adults for more than 30 years and currently operates in 12 cities across the United States. The program typically partners with schools in low-income urban areas. Over 90 percent of Bridges participants are young adults of color. Its funding comes from the J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation, vocational rehabilitation agencies, school districts, foundations, and private donations. About half of Bridges' locations will participate in the Next Generation of Enhanced Employment Strategies (NextGen) Project (see box).



Next Generation of Enhanced Employment Strategies (NextGen) Project



The goal of the NextGen Project is to identify and study innovative employment programs for people facing complex employment challenges. The study explores how the programs are designed and operated, their cost, and how effective they are at improving participants' employment, health, and other outcomes related to economic self-sufficiency and well-being. The NextGen Project is part of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation's [Innovative Strategies for Addressing Employment Barriers Portfolio](#), which seeks to rigorously evaluate the "next generation" of employment strategies for individuals with low income, and is partnering with the Social Security Administration on select evaluations.

Five key features of Bridges

- 1. Dual customer approach of considering employer and participant needs.** Bridges' employer representatives (ERs; see box below) focus on matching the needs of local employers with job candidates who Bridges prepares for work. ERs maintain strong relationships with local employers and are expected to develop at least three new connections to local employers each year. ERs routinely assess employers' hiring needs and try to identify Bridges participants who have the skills that employers need.

Who are employer representatives?


Bridges' frontline staff are known as employer representatives, or ERs. The name highlights the organization's commitment to meeting local employers' needs as well as those of program participants. ERs have college degrees from a range of backgrounds and primarily learn on the job from other staff. They also attend a three-day Bridges Basics in-person training within a year of starting work, along with online training modules over the first six months. The majority of local leaders at each Bridges site formerly worked as ERs and therefore know the ER characteristics and activities that seem to lead to successful participant outcomes. Local leaders monitor staff activities by reviewing case notes and provide input to staff on a routine basis.

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- 2. Focus on participants' skills, interests, and abilities—not their disabilities.** Bridges does not present participants to employers as students with disabilities, nor are disabilities typically discussed as part of the hiring process. Rather, the program aims to equip participants to be well prepared to find a job and succeed at work, and seeks to match participants to positions that are well suited to their skills and strengths.
 - 3. A single point of contact for each participant.** Each participant works with the same ER from their first interaction with the program, with no handoffs to other staff for the duration of the program. As a result, ERs can become a trusted resource for participants. For young adults in school, the ER also is the single point of contact with the participant's teacher, working collaboratively to identify their unique skills and support needs. As they learn more about students who thrive in the program, teachers often work with ERs to refer new participants.
 - 4. Intensive support from preemployment to job search to post-employment.** ERs tailor preemployment skills training to participant readiness. They routinely assist participants with preparing a résumé, practicing communication skills, and preparing for and securing interviews. ERs assist participants with their job search—they might help participants complete online applications, train them on how to use public transportation to get to and from work, and drive participants to job interviews. After the participant is hired, the ER assists them with new hire paperwork, background checks, and securing work uniforms. The ER checks in weekly to offer support and encouragement, offers on-site job coaching as needed, and advises on skill building for retention and advancement. In addition, the ER checks in with managers and co-workers to assess progress and correct any performance issues. ERs work with participants for up to a year post-placement as needed, and will help them identify another job if the current one is not the right fit.
 - 5. Well-defined performance metrics for staff that incentivize helping participants achieve and sustain employment.** ERs aim to enroll at least 20 participants into the program each year. Of those 20, 16 must be placed in a job, 12 must achieve 90 days employed, and 10 must achieve 180 days on the job (either at the original or subsequent placement). Achieving these milestones is part of an ER's performance review and factors into their annual compensation.


The NextGen Project will release findings about Bridges over the next few years.


The project team will collect and analyze information about how Bridges operates, its successes and challenges, its cost, and its effectiveness compared with other employment services available to young adults in the community. For more information, visit the NextGen Project's web page <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/next-generation-of-enhanced-employment-strategies-project> or email us NextGenProject@mathematica-mpr.com about receiving regular updates on the project.

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