

Issue BRIEF

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International Efforts to Serve Youth with Disabilities: Lessons for the U.S. Disability Support System

This brief summarizes the findings from two studies that examine programs and policies in

10 countries

addressing transition barriers faced by youth with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

U.S. policymakers at all levels are dissatisfied with the current system of transition supports for youth with disabilities—supports that are rather limited in promoting employment and self-sufficiency in adulthood. Information on the supports developed in other countries, whose youth with disabilities face similar issues, could be helpful for developing new solutions in the United States. This brief summarizes the findings from two studies that examined programs and policies in 10 countries addressing transition barriers faced by youth with disabilities. It also provides an overview of promising strategies from two countries—Germany and the Netherlands—with potential transferability to the United States.

BARRIERS TO TRANSITION IN THE UNITED STATES

The transition from youth to adulthood is difficult for many people, and those with disabilities can face even more barriers. Poor health and social isolation pose significant challenges during this transition, limiting the ability to connect to educational and employment opportunities. A strong system of supports—including education, vocational supports, income supports, health insurance coverage, health care, transportation, life skills, and housing—can help youth with disabilities overcome these challenges. Although U.S. public policy in this area has for the past three decades emphasized greater inclusiveness and independence, the current system provides few

supports and limited access to services, which leaves systemic barriers to successful transition.

U.S. youth with disabilities face four types of policy-related barriers during the transition to adulthood:

- 1. Insufficient employment supports.** Despite consensus on the effectiveness of vocational supports, youth with disabilities often have few options to access such supports. Specialized vocational programs are often located only in certain communities or serve only a small portion of the youth who could benefit from them, and state-based vocational rehabilitation agencies may have long waitlists as a result of resource constraints. Employers often lack access to or knowledge about

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supports for employees with disabilities, such as accommodation assistance.

2. **Few services targeted specifically to the needs of youth and young adults.** The United States has few national programs that are specifically targeted to youth and young adults with disabilities, many of whom are eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, a program designed to support adults. Many vocational rehabilitation agencies do not have counselors focused on working with youth or young adults and often do not begin providing vocational services until after young adults have completed high school. Other programs targeting young adults with disabilities tend to serve a small number in few locations and have not yet been evaluated as to their effectiveness.
3. **Issues with access to adult services.** Compared to the services youth receive in secondary school, the landscape of adult services is fragmented and often confusing. Service agencies and benefit programs have different and varied eligibility requirements. Agencies often lack funding to provide services to all youth who would benefit; they also lack the incentive or ability to coordinate with other agencies in the provision of services to the same youth.
4. **Insufficient coordination of the transition from youth to adult services.** Despite a strong service provision system for youth with disabilities in high school, several gaps remain. Youths who drop out of secondary school or attend a school that is unaware of their disability may not receive transitional services. For youth who leave school for any reason, no single community agency is

responsible for facilitating the transition process. In addition, the resources and capacities of local schools and providers for transition coordination vary greatly by state and locality.

INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIES TO REDUCE BARRIERS

These challenges for youth with disabilities are not unique to the United States. The experiences of other countries working to address similar issues can help to inform future policy directions for the United States across the local, state, and national levels. We used the approach listed in Box 1 to identify and review the programs for youth with disabilities in 10 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

The 10 countries have implemented many different kinds of transition options. Although the review revealed promising ideas for potential implementation or testing in the United States, the evidence as to whether these policies and programs are effective is missing in most cases. Table 1 presents an overview of the types of policy strategies and the countries implementing them.

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Box 1. Overview of Study Approach

The reports summarized in this brief identified and assessed promising programs for youth in transition using the following approach:

- Selected 10 OECD countries with well-developed benefit and rehabilitation programs
- For each country, reviewed published literature in peer-reviewed journals, OECD cross-country studies, government publications and websites, and suggestions from international and local experts
- Identified policies and programs that promote transition of youth with disabilities and could potentially be applied in the United States
- Conducted in-depth case studies of promising programs and policies in two countries, using additional publicly available information and input from three experts

Summary of Types of Transition Programs Implemented in Selected OECD Countries

Policies Promoting Employment for People with Disabilities	Programs and Policies Targeted to Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities	Policies Promoting Access to Adult Services for People with Disabilities	Policies Promoting Coordination of the Transition from Youth to Adult Services for People with Disabilities
Promoting supported employment over sheltered employment (<i>Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, United Kingdom</i>)	Offering a youth-specific national employment strategy (<i>Canada, Germany, Norway</i>)	Consolidated supports (<i>France, Norway</i>)	Increased coordination of services (<i>Australia, the Netherlands, United Kingdom</i>)
Financial incentives offered to employers (<i>Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden</i>)	Conducting many youth-specific pilot projects (<i>Germany, the Netherlands, Norway</i>)	Coordinated benefits and services (<i>Australia, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands</i>)	Improved transition planning efforts (<i>Denmark, France, Norway</i>)
Financial incentives offered to workers with disabilities (<i>Australia, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, United Kingdom</i>)	Providing educational supports (<i>Denmark, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, United Kingdom</i>)	Income supports for vocational rehabilitation (<i>Denmark, Germany, Norway</i>)	Increased supports for postsecondary education (<i>Australia, France, Germany, Ireland, Norway, United Kingdom</i>)
Financial incentives and mandates for vocational training (<i>Australia, Germany, Ireland, United Kingdom</i>)	Establishing youth-specific vocational programs (<i>Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, United Kingdom</i>)	Monitored service access (<i>Sweden</i>)	Increased vocational supports (<i>Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, United Kingdom</i>)
Innovative policies that promote employment in selected countries (<i>Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden</i>)	Providing income-support programs (<i>Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden</i>) Providing income supplements (<i>Australia, Canada</i>)	Direct access to services (<i>Australia, Canada, Denmark, United Kingdom</i>)	Expanding age requirements (<i>Australia, France, Germany, Ireland, Sweden</i>)

Table 1

All OECD countries in the review had actively pursued solutions to the problem of inadequate coordination of the transition from youth to adult services, including efforts to improve service coordination and transition planning, increased educational and vocational supports, and adjusted age requirements for services.

Some countries had policies *targeted specifically to youth with disabilities*—and in at least three countries, investment in large-scale, youth-specific pilot projects has helped government agencies to identify what works. Many of these pilots had been part of national youth-specific employment strategies looking for specific programs or program components that can be expanded nationally.

Most of the OECD countries were also operating, at various levels of government, programs that have been designed to *improve the access to adult services for people with disabilities*. Some of these initiatives have improved the coordination of benefits and services by combining multiple support programs under the oversight of a single agency; others have promoted automatic eligibility for or access to programs and services, developed systems for monitoring the performance of local services, or simplified the administration of disability supports by consolidating them into a single benefit program.

Finally, all OECD countries in the review had actively pursued solutions to the problem of inadequate *coordination of the transition from youth to adult services*, including efforts to improve service coordination and transition planning, increased educational and vocational supports, and adjusted age requirements for services.

EXPERIENCES IN GERMANY AND THE NETHERLANDS

The initial review of country programs identified many gaps in the knowledge about the development, implementation, and outcomes of specific programs. To address these gaps, we turned our focus to programs in Germany and the Netherlands, both of which provide a wide range of supports for youth with disabilities. Germany emphasizes addressing the challenges faced by young adults with disabilities by building on its existing vocational system for all youth. In contrast, the Netherlands offers separate programs specifically targeted to youth with disabilities. The experiences of these two countries provide U.S. policymakers with interesting opportunities to observe alternatives for addressing transition barriers.

Certain features of the system in each country stand in sharp contrast to features of the U.S. system:

- The German transition system guides all youth through this process, whereas the U.S. system leaves youth to follow their own paths.

- The German system guarantees income support while youth are in vocational training, whereas the U.S. system does not offer this type of support.
- The Dutch system expects youth to work up to their capacity, whereas the U.S. approach assumes that youth receiving SSI disability benefits are not able to work.
- The Dutch system guarantees services to and opportunities for youth and delivers them in a coordinated manner, whereas the U.S. approach neither guarantees nor coordinates services.
- The Dutch and German systems emphasize employment supports for youth and employers within a broader set of supports for this population, whereas the U.S. system is ambiguous about integrating employment supports with other supports.

Table 2 presents a summary of 16 program options available to youth with disabilities in Germany and the Netherlands. Of these 16 programs, 5 satisfied the criteria for transferability listed in Box 2, making them reasonable candidates for transfer to the United States:

1. A centralized Dutch agency contracts with private-sector **reintegration companies** to coordinate access to employment and vocational services for youth with disabilities. These companies implement work-oriented supports for people with disabilities aimed at encouraging them to work (instead of receiving benefits) and encouraging employers to hire hard-to-employ people.
2. The German program **Specialist Integration Services** (*Integrationsfachdienste*), a joint operation between the Federal Employment Agency and the states, provides supports for people with disabilities in finding and obtaining employment and for employers in training and funding opportunities.
3. Germany's **Job4000** and **Initiative Inklusion** set national goals and policies for youth and young adults with disabilities that—along with funding—encourage states to develop resources to serve this population. By setting measurable goals, policymakers can track state progress on achieving objectives and inform the establishment of future goals.

Selected German and Dutch Transition Strategies and Programs

Transition Strategy	German Programs	Dutch Programs
Providing youth-specific income-support programs	None	Young disabled person pension (<i>Wajong</i>)
Establishing youth-specific vocational programs	Transitional vocational income supports Vocational training centers (<i>Berufsbildungswerke</i>)	Reintegration companies Targeted vocational supports for <i>Wajong</i> participants
Expanding educational and vocational supports	Supported employment (<i>Unterstützte Beschäftigung</i>)	Special financing for education
Specifying a youth-specific national employment strategy	<i>Job4000</i> , <i>Initiative Inklusion</i>	None
Coordinating benefits and services	Specialist integration services (<i>Integrationsfachdienste</i>)	Centralized agency (UWV) for income and work supports Local transition collaborative agreements
Offering financial incentives targeted to employers	Act on Promoting Vocational Training (<i>Ausbildungsförderung</i>)	Wage subsidies and dispensations
Offering financial incentives to workers with disabilities	None	Expanding program rules on earnings
Relying on a personal budget	Personal budget (<i>Persönliches Budget</i>)	None
Establishing a quota for workers with disabilities	Employer quota system	None

Table 2

4. A subcomponent of the *Wajong* Dutch program provides an array of **employment supports for *Wajong* participants and their employers**, many of them accessible for a long period, to promote labor force participation. Those in the work track also have the expectation of and responsibility for taking up work, even if not at 100 percent of the basic earnings level.

5. The Netherlands has **expanded program rules on earnings** for its *Wajong* program designed to encourage its beneficiaries to work. The intent is to make work more financially appealing.

Despite the array of programs in Germany and the Netherlands, both countries continue to face three issues in promoting outcomes for youth with disabilities. First, coordination among programs—and between local, state, and federal entities—is difficult in both countries, which results

in fragmentation of services just as in the United States. Second, neither country has readily available data on youth served across different programs or their eventual outcomes. Third, few rigorous evaluations of program effectiveness, particularly on whether specific programs have actually promoted employment outcomes for their target populations, have been completed. This paucity of rigorous evidence on program effectiveness currently poses a major barrier to recommending the transferability of specific programs to the United States.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. DISABILITY SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR YOUTH

The 10 OECD countries have instituted many policies that could address barriers faced by U.S. youth with disabilities in the transition to adulthood. Although none of these programs

Box 2. Transferability Considerations

Dutch and German programs were assessed on their potential transferability to the United States according to three qualitative criteria: program efficiency, adaptability, and applicability.

Efficiency concerns whether the selected program addressed at least one of four barriers facing U.S. transition-aged youth with disabilities: (1) insufficient employer supports, (2) insufficient services for youth, (3) limited access to adult services, and (4) poor coordination between youth and adult services. Programs that addressed more barriers were regarded as being more efficient.

Adaptability involves the feasibility of implementing the selected program in the United States, considering the overall financial cost of the program and the potential of stakeholders (advocates, policymakers, taxpayers, and youth with disabilities) to agree with the program in principle. Programs that are expected to have lower costs and greater public support were perceived as being more adaptable.

Applicability considers factors related to whether the selected program could meet the needs of a large proportion of youth with disabilities, an important concern because of the scale of the transition issue in the United States. Programs that would affect larger numbers of youth were assessed as being more applicable.

represents a perfect solution, the fact that the reviewed countries have developed so many types of supports, and done so in broad ways, underscores their commitment to promote transitions, and the United States can learn from their successes and failures. The Dutch and German transition experiences, in particular, suggest that the U.S. transition system could be reformed in a number of ways appropriate for the current transition environment: setting national goals and providing financial and other supports to states to achieve them, establishing a centralized source of information and supports, encouraging private companies to provide transition services, and expanding employment supports for disability income beneficiaries.

However, social policy transfer between governments poses huge political and institutional challenges and requires careful consideration of what is being transferred, the actors involved, the reasons for the transfer, and the degree of transfer. The specifics—the why and how, the details and contexts—are ultimately under the purview of policymakers. The main rationale for such examination is the dissatisfaction at all levels—among advocates, agency staff, people with disabilities, policymakers, and stakeholders—with the current system of supports for U.S. youth with disabilities. Any policy transfer will have to be assessed in view of the local context, the complexity of implementation, and political considerations.

Although it is naïve to assume that the United States will embrace the transfer of

these strategies, this enhanced understanding of the reviewed countries more broadly, and the German and Dutch experiences more specifically, may provide valuable context for U.S. policymakers as they continue to shape their thinking about how to effectively and efficiently serve youth with disabilities.

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