



ASPIRE

Achieving Success by Promoting Readiness
for Education and Employment
A PROMISE Initiative

Chapter 6: ASPIRE Recommendations

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This chapter of the ASPIRE final report is a summary of recommendations from ASPIRE. It is the final of six documents. Chapter 1 describes ASPIRE's formation, implementation, evaluation and conclusion. Chapter 2 describes the unique characteristics and challenges of a consortium of states implementing a federal model demonstration project. Chapter 3 describes ASPIRE's implementation of the ABLE deposit opportunity. Chapter 4 describes the ASPIRE's comprehensive training program to ensure fidelity of the PROMISE research study. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of ASPIRE's Formative Evaluation Team.

ASPIRE Consortium

Operation of a consortium

Any recommendations from ASPIRE must include the note that ASPIRE is a consortium of states, with 13 hiring authorities, and 58 contracts to implement a Department of Education Model Demonstration Project. This alone lends complexities to any recommendations which can be made

ASPIRE was very creative to implement strategies to overcome the many challenges it faced. As described in previous chapters of this report, ASPIRE learned a great deal which can be used to improve services to youth with disabilities and their families in the future. ASPIRE also learned of systemic differences to personnel and fiscal processes which impact implementation of new or innovated strategies which may be new for the authorizing agency. While contracting can be detailed, the relationships behind the contracts is critical.

It is possible to implement a research study to fidelity in a consortium of states. However, it is not without careful planning, great effort, creativity and flexibility. Future leaders of consortia must be proactive and envision a new and improved way of collaborating and moving forward. The administration must be clear and transparent to all staff. Each staff member will have previous experience that may draw into question innovative procedures. Increased communication, through all means, is necessary. Roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined and all management must remain focused on the final outcome, not solely their responsibilities. Each staff member must be held accountable for their work. See Chapter 2 for further information.

Recommendations

These recommendations are topical in nature, and not ranked by importance.

Early intervention

ASPIRE youth who had longer and more frequent interactions with Case Managers had greater graduation rates and employment. ASPIRE enrolled youth between the ages of 14 and

17, younger than is typical of most services as youth transition to adulthood. WIOA now includes the Pre-Employment Transition Services which is an opportunity to intervene at a younger age. Visits to businesses or college campuses, shadowing of employees and informational interviewing are just a few strategies to explore and generate interest in the future.

Career exploration activities including information gathering and external linkages, and increased case management are significant predictors of ASPIRE youth employment. Career exploration activities were more strongly associated with employment outcomes when they were delivered earlier during case management, when youth were just beginning to think about their futures. Creating opportunities at a younger age is critical, whether it is through the schools or another organization.

Presumption of participation in existing services

Fully 20% of ASPIRE youth, with significant disabilities are not served in Special Education (IDEA). Therefore school based special education services cannot be the only means to find these youth. A broader youth-find strategy must be implemented to reach youth with disabilities who are not receiving IDEA services. Strategies similar to state child-find operations may be implemented.

Approaches correlated to youth employment

Case management in ASPIRE is defined as monthly meetings to review life status, goals, upcoming trainings, and actions to be taken by the youth or family. Three approaches to case management that influence youth employment include: holistic family focus, persistence, and flexibility.

Family focus. ASPIRE was designed to include services to parents and other family members. Too often federal and state programs are limited to the eligible individual, rather than the family unit in which the eligible individual lives. By addressing the education and employment of all family members, the entire household increases their expectations and pursues knowledge and skill development. Family based services such as financial capability training or Benefits Counseling empower the entire household. Even training specific to parents will support the eligible individual.

Persistent contacts. When ASPIRE Case Managers persisted in contacting youth, they more likely they participated in intervention opportunities, set goals for the future and pursued developing their knowledge and skills, which resulted in higher graduation rates and employment. Typically, federal and state programs quantify the number of contacts prior to case closure, such as two letters and a phone call. This is insufficient with youth and with their parents. There must be persistent efforts to contact youth

with disabilities and their families, without regard to a number of attempts. No number is ever sufficient.

Flexibility. ASPIRE staff met with families at variable times and locations. Case Managers were expected to adjust their schedules to the convenience of the youth and families. This flexibility increased the contact time with each youth and family, who then had greater outcomes of employment and education. The professional staff serving youth and families must be provided the flexibility to do so. Meetings may need to occur outside of the typical 8 to 5 office day and outside of one's office. Agency procedures must allow for flexible work hours and locations.

Community based services

Too often youth and families operate in the vacuum of the school or a specific service office, rather than in the community. Community based experiences, including resource mapping and employment develop an expectation of living in a community. Exploration of post-secondary training/education, employment supports, recreation, life-long learning, etc. boosts opportunities for natural and typical supports rather than specialized services. Engaging youth and families within the community is essential.

Incorporate self-determination training

Youth who participated in self-determination training, were better able to develop a strong self-esteem, describe their disabilities and advocate for their accommodation needs. Many trainings and curricula exist and should be utilized by the many agencies and organizations serving youth and their families. When staff can incorporate the strategies of self-determination into case management, they will empower the youth to develop the skills needed to advocate for themselves in the future.

Development of SMART goals

Too often goals are limited by their lack of completeness and often are not of primary interest of the youth. ASPIRE developed SMART goals with the youth and family to ensure their interest and relevancy. SMART means the goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-limited. The more concise the SMART goal, with reasonable time limits, the greater their achievement. ASPIRE revisited and discussed youth and family goals each month. Creation of goals which follow the SMART protocol and are frequently reviewed and revised ensure that the goals are active and remain valuable. They are then more likely to be achieved.

Strong provider relationships

Youth with disabilities and their families will benefit from many services and supports that exist in a community. However, too often they do not know they exist. Cross training of community and agencies' staff will increase the professionals' understanding of services and

supports that can be shared with the youth or family from many perspectives. The idea of a 'One-Stop' resource may seem ideal, however it is limited when each professional lacks comprehensive knowledge of services and supports. Toll free numbers with trained specialists and comprehensive websites allow for exploration across the many available services. Ongoing cross training of staff among the agencies and organizations will assist their knowledge and skill development in order to assist youth with disabilities and their families.

Understanding public benefits

Public benefits are complicated. Many myths surround Social Security and Medicaid, as well as other public benefits such as housing, SNAP, utility assistance, etc. Most prominent is that myth that increasing one's income will result in the loss of these benefits. For individuals receiving Social Security benefits, Benefits Counseling by a WIPA is essential and should be made widely available. Benefits Counselors provide accurate information and support to ensure individuals have the knowledge to make informed decisions about working and increasing their income. Efforts to promote the service is needed. For individuals not receiving Social Security, but who receive other public benefits lack the information resource to understand their benefits. Too often when they need accurate counsel, they are referred to a call center which provides limited, sometimes conflicting information. Establishing a resource that provides accurate information to individuals receiving public benefits is critical.

Costs of participation in services

Participation in interventions resulted in increased employment and education for ASPIRE youth and families. ASPIRE provided the means, and often the meals to ensure that the participation in workshops or meetings did not adversely affect family financial stability. Frequently agencies and programs expect youth or families to travel or expend personal funds to participate. This is nearly impossible to do when living in poverty and with an extremely tight budget. The provision of transit passes seems simple, but getting to and from public transit may be difficult. The time to travel may also interfere with regular meals or employment, making it even more difficult to participate. Offering travel reimbursement requires the person living on limited funds to first pay, then wait for reimbursement, which may not be timely. Staff must be creative to avoid unduly burdening the youth or family, and thereby decreasing their participation. As noted earlier, meeting in locations, at times, which are convenient to the youth and families is necessary.

Privacy protections

FERPA, HIPAA, the Privacy Act, etc. are all examples of the many federal and state laws which protect an individual's identity. While well intentioned, the diversity of regulations has also created barriers to sharing information. A youth or parent must provide consent or asset, permission or authorization, for one entity to speak or share information with another. This is further complicated if one agency insists that it be only on its form, not another's. Agencies

and organizations need to create navigable means by which information is appropriately shared without undue burden to the youth or family to manage the information sharing.

[Time and opportunity to collaborate.](#)

The professional staff serving youth and families must be provided the flexibility to do so. Just as the ASPIRE Case Managers were flexible to schedule the times and locations of meetings, professional staff need to schedule time for meeting with others, particularly staff from the schools, Vocational Rehabilitation, Workforce, Developmental Disability, health care, housing, etc. Similarly, those meetings may occur outside of the typical 8 to 5 office day and outside of one's office. Agency procedures must allow for flexible work hours and locations to improve the collaboration of the professional staff.

[Service coordination](#)

If the privacy protections challenge is overcome, then services by agencies and NGOs can become more effective to coordinate essential services to youth and families. ASPIRE Case Managers spent time building relationships and coordinating communication across many agencies and services for a youth or family. Siloed services serve to frustrate individuals and families who must continually re-explain their needs. When various services coordinate as a single team with the youth or family, communication will increase, service duplication will decrease and goals can be achieved more quickly.

Summary

ASPIRE and the other five PROMISE projects demonstrated that when proven, evidence-based practices are simultaneously implemented with both an eligible youth and their families, education can be increased, employment improved and greater self-sufficiency achieved. Operation of these coordinated efforts is not without challenges. However, if the recommendations listed above can be implemented consistently, improved outcomes for youth with disabilities who receive SSI and their families, can be realized.