Reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA): Priorities & Concerns for Students with Disabilities

Background

Congress created the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) in 1998 to replace the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) in an effort to streamline and strengthen America’s job training system. WIA took effect on July 1, 2000, and created a universal local “One-Stop” delivery system where multiple employment services, job training, and education programs are integrated and accessible to all job seekers. WIA is designed to meet local industry demands in communities across the county, and it mandates the participation of partner agencies that provide job-training services.

Recent Action Taken By the Obama Administration and Congress

WIA is long overdue for reauthorization. The House and Senate both passed their own versions of WIA Reauthorization in 2007, but failed to merge the two and send a bill to the President. The current Administration has renewed efforts to reauthorize WIA. Based on this renewed interest, CEC urges the Administration and Congress to consider the needs of students with disabilities and strengthen WIA’s programs for these students.

CEC’s Recommended Congressional Action

Supporting youth and adults with disabilities is a core purpose of WIA. To accomplish this goal, the reauthorization must address both the critical transition of students with disabilities from secondary to post-secondary education, and their meaningful participation in the workforce. Addressing these needs early on will create a solid foundation for building lifelong skills, finding and maintaining employment.

Individuals with disabilities face many challenges as they transition from school to work. Indeed, they drop out of high school at twice the rate of students without disabilities. This further complicates their ability to find meaningful employment or education opportunities over their lifetime. A recent national study on transition found that only 30% of individuals with disabilities, who exited public school, enrolled in post-secondary education as compared with 41% of their peers without disabilities. Additionally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that only 1 in 5 individuals with disabilities are employed. Moreover, those who are employed disproportionately work in part-time positions. Thus, it is not surprising that unemployment for people with disabilities as a whole and over the lifespan is substantially higher than for the population in general.

To address these concerns, WIA must strengthen coordination with IDEA, removing barriers in the workforce system, and maintaining high expectations for individuals with disabilities abilities to achieve fulfilling careers throughout their lifetimes. Indeed, a 2002 GAO survey found that building comprehensive youth development

---

2. Wagner, et. al. 2010. Comparisons Across Time of the Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities up to 4 Years After High School, A Report on the Findings From the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2).
systems, required, “strong working relationships between the workforce development and education systems at all levels of government.” Efforts to create and strengthen this coordination must be addressed in the reauthorization.

To that end, CEC believes that as a bedrock principle, transition planning must start as soon as possible, but no later than age 14. Moreover, CEC’s recommendations are designed to ensure that WIA reflects an underlying belief in high expectations for all youth, and reinforces self-determination, equality of opportunity, inclusion and integration.

**CEC recommends that Congress**

- **Improve Transition Systems between School and Work**
  - Require providers of youth services to coordinate their activities with the local educational authority and work collaboratively with local schools to incorporate WIA youth services into Individual Education Plans (IEP), with the school as a participating agency in the transition process.
  - Incentivize school districts to place students with disabilities into work experiences both inside and external to the traditional school and vocational rehabilitation settings.
  - Require and fund technical assistance for school districts with low placement rates for students with disabilities.

- **Enhance Outreach to the Community and Professional Development**
  - Authorize programs and funds for increased training and outreach on SSI work incentives and transition planning for families and youth.
  - Enhance programs that provide access to high quality evidence-based job coaching and mentoring.
  - Make the “One-Stops” more youth friendly. Require them to have - on staff - trained youth service professionals dedicated to providing high quality developmentally appropriate services to youth.
  - Create and fund state level positions to serve as liaisons to LEAs to assist individuals with disabilities in finding pathways to higher skilled and higher paying employment.
  - Create a dedicated funding stream to support professional development for individuals in One-Stops to achieve better collaboration across the school to work spectrum.

- **Require Representation of Disability Interests on State Workforce Investment Boards**
  - Require state Workforce Investment Boards to include experts and stakeholders in activities related to the employment of persons with disabilities, and who have an understanding of the education system.
  - Require states to create a special advisory councils dedicated to inclusion of and assistance to individuals with disabilities in state workforce projects, and include representation from the education community.

- **Create and Fund Research Priorities Designed to Address Individuals with Disabilities**
  - Authorize and fund additional federal research on transition-age youth who have disabilities and receive SSI.
  - Fund research about effective outreach strategies, partnership strategies and techniques for job acquisition for individuals with disabilities.

---

Clarify and Restructure WIA’s Performance Measures to Incentivize Providers to Work with Individuals with Disabilities
  o Require performance criteria that evaluate performance based on a number of factors, including the differentiation of degrees of difficulty and effort required, and other more flexible measures which can track and account for progress – and interim gains - over a longer period of time.
  o Design the performance investment system to acknowledge and reward providers who invest in the most challenging cases, while maintaining an emphasis on the number and rate of placements.

Include and Emphasize Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
  o Incorporate UDL throughout WIA – in the design of products, communication practices, training programs, services, and activities.
  o Include the definition of UDL currently used in the Higher Education Opportunity Act.

Fully Fund WIA
  o Fully fund WIA to ensure that 100% of all eligible individuals are served.
  o Fund the costs of operating “One-Stops” with a supplemental dedicated stream of funding in combination with the current cost allocation model.