



April 26, 2001

## Transcript of Conference Call Presentation

# Iowa's School-to-Work Initiative: Building a System by Connecting the Dots

presented by:

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**Ms. Leach:** This is Lynda Leach at the University of Illinois. Welcome to our conference call. We have four presenters from Iowa lined up to talk about Iowa's School-to-Work Initiative: Building a System by Connecting the Dots: Laurie Phelan from the Iowa Office of School-to-Work; Jack Hillyard from Iowa Creative Employment Options, University of Iowa; Barb McClannahan, Project Manager, Iowa Paths Systems Change Grant, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services; and Debbie Stevens, Coordinator, SUCCESS Center, Oskaloosa.

**Ms. Phelan:** I'm Laurie Phelan, Director of the Iowa School-to-Work (STW) Initiative. Since 1996, when Iowa received a national STW grant, the state has developed the STW initiative as a cross-agency systems change effort. At the state level we have a STW administrative team made up of chief administrators from the Departments of Education, Economic Development, and Workforce Development, and the Iowa Association of Business and Industry. This team meets every two weeks to discuss sustainability efforts and current events/activities across agencies and departments to determine where elements of STW should be linked to ensure state-level support of local activities. In Iowa, we have continually looked to all possible stakeholders to assist in building a system that will connect education with the future of every child. I believe that is our strength and is witnessed in the work of each of the presenters with us today.

Over the past five years many policy additions and modifications have been made. Some highlights

include new legislation that provides state financial support and FTEs for the School-to-Work Office continuing beyond the federal funding; and additions to Iowa Code, Chapter 12, that requires all school districts to have a career development system—K-12 at a minimum—and that it include the review of school plans by the community, including business and labor organizations. In addition, all districts are also required to report out on the employability of their graduates. This was also a policy change in Chapter 12, the Iowa Code addressing Comprehensive School Improvement.

The Iowa Department of Economic Development has designated an individual to be the STW contact for DED and works closely with the STW Office. Jointly we have developed a matrix connecting community resources to the continuum of STW system building and career pathways. Currently, DED is designing a model for engaging local Chambers of Commerce in the leadership role of community coordination around STW principles. This effort is strongly supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Iowa Workforce Development has passed legislation to support the system developed through STW called Making Connections. This internet-based system connects students and teachers to work-based learning opportunities provided by employers across Iowa.

The above are among some of the major policy changes. Again this year, the legislature appropriated funds for the STW Office, even during a very tight

fiscal session. Our efforts in Iowa will continue to include the development of connective activities that provide tools, resources, and supportive policy for local system building. We have a lot to be proud of, particularly the development of strong partnerships at the local, regional, and state levels. Of course, there is much more to do in the areas of outcomes reporting and data regarding student performance, including demonstration of skills and abilities.

**Ms. McClannahan:** I am the project manager for a systems change grant that was written in 1998. Iowa is one of six states that was awarded a systems change grant from Rehabilitation Services Administration. The goals of the grant are to work to identify barriers to individuals with disabilities who also receive public assistance, to identify strategies to address those barriers, and then to support local demonstration projects that implement those strategies.

One of the strategies that we identified with School-to-Work, the Department of Education, Iowa Workforce Development (IWD), and Vocational Rehabilitation Services was a mentoring project. When our grant started in '98-'99, we were conducting focus groups around the state with consumers, service providers, and businesses about various employment barriers for this population. One of the barriers that consumers would continue to bring up was lack of confidence and lack of interpersonal support within the employment system. One of the goals of the grant was to try to look at how mentoring could help with self-confidence and help to overcome lack of a support system.

Statewide we started with professional networking. People started giving me Laurie's name and saying you need to talk to Laurie Phelan at School-to-Work. Between School-to-Work and the Department of Education, Voc Rehab, and IWD, we started talking about available mentoring models. We were referred to a project in Minnesota called Youth Trust of Minneapolis, and this model was an e-mentoring model (mentoring via e-mail). The model was set up for at-risk students in the inner city. We called the Youth Trust project and asked them to come down and visit with some of our partners. That occurred, and we publicized this over the Iowa television network (ICN) system and had many interested local communities listening to this presentation.

Debbie Stevens is on the line with me, and

one of the goals of our Systems Change grant is to provide support through local community initiatives. We know that change is most effectively driven locally. As we talked about doing this, we found two communities in Iowa, Oskaloosa and Bettendorf, that were willing to step forward and say, "You know, we think this is a good idea. We think this is something that could work in our community, and we would like to partner with you and try piloting this project." That's how, through our professional networking, we came about having local and state partners.

When Minnesota heard that we were going to take their model and try to fine-tune it and shape it for focusing specifically on youth with disabilities in the schools, they were also interested in that concept and they said that they would also like to join us. They identified two communities in Minnesota—Windom and Minneapolis—that are also piloting this project and specifically focusing on youth with disabilities at this time. This is how we ended up having not only state and local partners, but also partners across the border in Minnesota.

We have been having many conference calls. We have had some face-to-face meetings with Minnesota folks who have come to Iowa and we have gone up to Minnesota. Basically between the two states we have set up some overall goals and objectives. We have set up a basic structure of how e-mentoring should operate. We have set up boundaries, and we are developing manuals in our states as we are doing this: some how-to steps on how to start, who are some essential partners, what are some key steps, guidelines, tips, and that type of thing.

We are all collecting data at our sites. The local partners have been key in getting this off the ground, and I am going to let Debbie Stevens talk a little bit about some of the things we had to address locally: technology issues, marketing and recruitment, and collaborating with resources within the local community to make this work with their business partners.

Debbie, I am going to let you talk a little bit about how, once we started the themes and ideas going, the local partners had to take this and start to develop it.

**Ms. Stevens:** Okay. I am Debbie Stevens, and I am with the SUCCESS Center in Oskaloosa, IA. The SUCCESS Center was started from a School-

to-Work grant. It's a business-education partnership. I think partnerships are what it's all about for any of this type to work. We have limited resources. Many people are trying to do what's good for kids or for communities, but if you can partner and do it, you use your resources more effectively. I would consider partner-building one of the most instrumental things in any of the activities that we have done. That's how I met Barb at DVRS, and that's how we became involved with the e-mentoring program.

Agencies in our area such as the Centers for Independent Living, U-IA Extension, Iowa Workforce Development, some postsecondary educators, and many businesses, industries, and service organizations heard about what we were trying to do, and now I have had no problem locating people to be e-mentors for this project. E-mentoring is another way to meet that school-to-work goal that we have: career exploration and connecting students with real-life people in careers in which they may be interested. It also lets them develop some employability skills that they are going to need when they graduate or go on to school and graduate from a postsecondary program.

The program looks like this. We have the management group, which consists of the coordinator, the teachers, and the mentors. Right now, I am the coordinator. I help teachers identify possible mentors and connect them with the students. The teachers choose the students to be in the program, and we match them up.

We have been doing our matching on a teacher-to-mentor basis. We have the teacher's class list. She has the forms that the students fill out, and our teacher meets with the group of mentors for that particular class. They talk about confidentiality issues, how it's going to work, and what expectations the teacher has. We have identified career development and exploration as well as communication skills as two goals that the teachers want their students to work on with the e-mentors. Then we set up the program, and after the training, the mentors are the ones that begin. They send the first message to the students and get the ball rolling.

Now, our mentors are coming from business and industry. We have one group of mentors that's from one company that works with a teacher. Then we have professionals or service organization mem-

bers and even a local graduate who is in secondary school right now at Iowa State.

MS. STEVENS WAS DISCONNECTED DUE TO TECHNICAL PROBLEMS.

**Mr. Hillyard:** I am Jack Hillyard. I am the director of Iowa's Creative Employment Options program, which is a program of Iowa University Affiliated Program located in the University of Iowa. Our mission is to promote economic development throughout Iowa by advancing business-aligned public policies that target Iowa's employers' human resource needs through the employment of people with disabilities.

Public policy is a significant part of our mission, especially now inasmuch as Iowa has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation and we are looking more and more at alternative groups or nontraditional groups that include people with disabilities. We advance our mission by facilitating both business and consumer leadership at the state and local levels by working with coalitions to improve public policy regarding workforce access.

We attempt to build strategic alliances between companies and various consumer coalitions by providing forums through which business and employment efforts may be highlighted. Throughout our work we over and over again know that the business community is very interested in educational standards, because they look to these youth as a potential future workforce and are not at all opposed to working with youth with disabilities.

One of the things that I am going to report on today is what we call the Healthy and Ready To Work (HRTW) initiative that is currently funded by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In this we are in the fourth year of a four-year project now. To set the context, we have approached this grant from an educational perspective in that we have always considered education as the great equalizer in our country and the means by which minorities gain a certain foothold in today's workplaces.

As you undoubtedly know, people with disabilities are unemployed at a much higher rate than their non-disabled peers. People with disabilities frequently have not received the same education as their non-disabled peers, are more likely to drop out of high school, and are less than half as likely to

pursue postsecondary education. In fact, we have a history of setting up special situations—special educational situations for students with disabilities as opposed to practicing inclusive education.

National graduation rates for children who receive special education has stagnated at 27% for the past three years while 75% of students who do not rely on special education graduate. Just barely one-quarter of those in special education obtain their high school diploma.

One of the things that we really push in our grant is inclusive educational practices. For instance, we have young people in our grant attending a summer business camp hosted by the Iowa Association of Business and Industry, Business Horizon Summer Camp. It's designed to get kids involved and become more knowledgeable about careers and workplace practices. Iowa CEO has been involved with the camp for the last four years. This is the first time there has been an active attempt to include youth with disabilities in this camp, and we are very excited by that.

We are finding with the Business Horizon Summer Camp that even though this is a business-oriented camp, it is apparent that the sponsors are not really attuned to accessibility issues or even equipped to address them. We have a young woman named Natalie who will be joining us, and she requires significant accommodations. We consider this an opportunity to train the business community on accommodation needs and strategies.

One of the things we would really like to advance is work-based learning, as opposed to just work experiences. Work-based learning (otherwise known as contextual learning) is where all students are learning their reading, writing, and arithmetic at a worksite so that their learning content is relevant.

The HRTW project has a mentoring program that is comprised of young adults with disabilities who are either in a career or on a career track. This is distinguished from the previous e-mentoring project. The mentors we have are under age 27 with disabilities who, like I said, are involved in their career or pursuing post-educational training. The fascinating part of that is that when we came up with the idea, we had a difficult time trying to find young people who were in positions that we all aspire to. We initially went to the system and

looked, but we found the question emerged, well, where do you find workers or where do you find students? You find workers in businesses, and you find students in schools.

We had to ask ourselves where we could find youth with disabilities or young adults with disabilities. The business community as well as the colleges and universities were able to offer us a handful of names. This only underscores that, by first going to the human service system, how we originally fell into institutional and bureaucratic thinking rather than working from an inclusive frame of reference.

The young adults who are involved in our mentoring program mentor high school or even younger kids with disabilities. Their careers range from computer programmers to social workers to insurance industry professionals to pharmaceuticals to working as a floor manager to running a teleprompter for a television station. Two of our mentors are beauty contest winners; one is a former Miss Wheelchair Iowa and one is the reigning Miss Iowa, both of whom have disabilities.

The mentors that we work with have universally expressed their motivation to mentor to a younger person with disabilities. This stems from, had they known then what they know now, they would have looked for someone with similar disabilities. Interestingly enough, one of the questions for the mentees is, "If I were a young adult, who would I go to with a disability?" None of the current mentors are receiving public entitlements, which is why we had difficulty finding them in the first place. They were simply busy doing their work. Despite their busy schedules, they are very, very interested in helping employers and schools, as well as young kids with disabilities. The one thing that's really neat to us, that's really gotten me excited, is that these young adults are actually mentoring families of young children with disabilities, which is a very exciting turn of events.

This program is unique in that it utilizes upwardly mobile young adults with disabilities and allows mentors to determine their own level of involvement, which can include face-to-face meetings. There are very few other mentoring programs that exist to match students with disabilities with other people with disabilities.

Our mentors have observed that employers are afraid of employing persons with disabilities. Our

mentors believe that by being in contact with employers as individuals or as a group, they can make a difference in allaying those fears. The HRTW mentors want employers, communities, and families to have the same set of expectations for them to succeed at work as others: that people with disabilities are *expected* to work as opposed to just being *encouraged*. This is one of the things that is really a major principle in our HRTW grant. Our feeling is that in order to be really, truly inclusive, the expectation should be the same for all people.

We are also trying to provide Living Well with a Disability training through school nurses in our HRTW grant. The mentors could be involved in this and also in collaboration with the Iowa's Centers for Independent Living.

We are also currently doing four separate surveys—all of which are about expectations of students with disabilities. Our surveys are being distributed to all school personnel (from the superintendent to janitors), area businesses, families of students with disabilities, and physicians who are treating children. We hope to be able to release these findings this coming fall. Before I quit today, if you are interested, I will give you information on how to contact us.

Through the HRTW project, we have created several products that we will be glad to share. We have "A Roadmap to Independence," which is a guide for parents of children with disabilities. If you are interested in our survey findings or our various HRTW products, you may call me at 515-283-2310, or you can contact us via the following Web site: [www.medicine.uiowa.edu/hrtw/](http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/hrtw/). I look forward to hearing from you during the question period, through e-mail, or by telephone.

**Ms. Leach:** Thank you, Jack. That was very interesting and informative, and I am glad you gave us the Web sites because those are always helpful. When Barb was talking about e-mentoring, I looked at the e-mentoring Web site, and I would like to give that web address. It is [ici.umn.edu/ementoring](http://ici.umn.edu/ementoring), and I found that site really fascinating. It will be very helpful to go along with the manuals that you are developing, Barb.

**Ms. McClannahan:** Yes, that's being developed with our partners at the University of Minnesota, and Carrie Sword is heading the Web site.

**Ms. Leach:** Great. Great. I think right now we

have finished with our presentations by the presenters, and I would now like to entertain questions from participants. Does anyone have one?

**Dr. Chadsey:** Hi, Jack and Barb, this is Janis Chadsey from the University of Illinois. One of the things I wanted to ask about the e-mentoring in particular was, do you have special accommodations for students who can't read or who are visually impaired?

**Ms. McClannahan:** We haven't run into any students who were visually impaired yet with these pilot projects, but we are targeting groups that have at least a fourth grade reading level, third or fourth grade reading level because the e-mentoring really—it's communication via e-mail.

As we talked about this and we looked at what happened in Minnesota, one of the lessons that they had learned from those employers was to keep the communication flowing, there did need to be a minimum standard of how well the person could communicate via e-mail. It takes technical skills, although I would say that in Minnesota when they started working, one of the positive outcomes was the employers noticed the skill ability to communicate via e-mail with their mentees improving with the students over the course of the year. They definitely saw growth in that.

One of our goals is to increase their ability to use technology to communicate, to write, to improve writing skills. We are doing some pre- and post-testing on that with the teachers. That is part of our research. After a year of this, we have seen some growth not only in technical skills but in attendance, attitude, information about careers, those kinds of things!

**Dr. Chadsey:** Well, that's really interesting. How about you, Jack? Have you encountered any students who maybe don't read at that particular level or who are visually impaired or with physical disabilities that they can't physically type?

**Mr. Hillyard:** One of our mentors is blind, and so we have arranged for readers and we would be glad to do that for others. We use Braille for the text and send it out as a service to the mentoring group.

**Dr. Chadsey:** That's great. I didn't know whether or not any of the individuals involved were using voice-activated software?

**Mr. Hillyard:** Not currently, but that would be something that we could help support for sure.

**Ms. McClannahan:** Since we are using the schools, they are connected with the AEAs, our area education agencies, and students within the school district who have those kinds of needs, the school districts are providing that technology.

**Dr. Chadsey:** That's great.

**Mr. Hillyard:** Like I say, one of our mentors does have blindness, and she has been really helpful to all of us in learning how to accommodate that. We provide the Braille service. That's exactly why we want our project to have young adults with disabilities as mentors to teach other kids how to accommodate for their own disability.

**Dr. Chadsey:** Okay. Thanks.

**Ms. Leach:** Questions?

**Dr. Chadsey:** This is Janis again. I have one more, and then I will be quiet. Jack, I was intrigued with this idea of this Business Horizon Summer Camp that has included individuals with disabilities. What actually goes on at that camp?

**Mr. Hillyard:** Well, they meet business people, executives, human resource people, do various business kind of exercises whereby they potentially have a mock budget for a certain company and are actually managing that. Most notably is making connections with business people.

**Dr. Chadsey:** This is a camp for students who are just interested in the business world?

**Mr. Hillyard:** That's correct—to expose them. It is a week long, and it is a sleepover like any other camp. The part that I like is the fact that now that kids with disabilities are involved, it's really teaching the business people something about disabilities and not only are we exposing kids to the business world, the business world is being exposed to kids with disabilities and their accommodation needs.

**Dr. Chadsey:** That sounds really interesting.

**Ms. Leach:** We may have to contact you later and get more information about that, Jack.

**Mr. Hillyard:** Yeah. All right.

**Ms. Leach:** I want to thank all of you for all the work you did prior to this conference call. Thank you for your patience with our technical difficulties, and I will be in touch with you.

**Mr. Hillyard:** All right. Thank you.

**Ms. Leach:** Thank you. Have a nice day.

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