

## Work Experiences for Youth with Disabilities

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The Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE) project is a 5-year, two-group, randomized controlled trial funded by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2013. Six sites were awarded funding to test the effectiveness of a multicomponent experimental intervention for improving academic, career, and financial outcomes for youth with disabilities receiving supplemental security income (SSI) benefits and their families. Awardees include Arkansas, ASPIRE (a consortium of six western states), California, Maryland, New York, and Wisconsin.

Transition Demonstration (YTD), targeted youth ages 14 through 25 who were receiving SSI or were at-risk of doing so. Findings from this study show youth SSI recipients with early work experiences were more likely to move to paid employment after high school (Mamun et al. 2017). PROMISE (Promoting Readiness of Minors in SSI) is the second federal initiative targeting youth ages 14 to 21 who are receiving SSI. Like YTD, the PROMISE intervention focused on providing youth with community-integrated work experiences and paid employment.

### Overview

Participating in the workforce and exploring careers should be a goal for all transition-age youth with disabilities. Studies show that access to early work experience is among the most consistent predictors of post-school employment (e.g., Carter et al. 2012; Test et al. 2009; Wehman et al. 2014). Yet, transition age youth who receive SSI experience unique barriers to obtaining such experience. These individuals and their families often weigh the benefits of work against their perceptions of the risks, including losing access to public support such as cash assistance and health insurance. In response to these issues, the federal government funded two major initiatives designed to test strategies that facilitate moving youth receiving SSI to paid employment. The first initiative, Youth

Maryland was one of six sites to participate in the PROMISE demonstration projects to improve education and employment outcomes for the target population. A key intervention of the MD PROMISE demonstration project focused on providing paid and unpaid work experiences in integrated community settings. All paid experiences were at or above the prevailing minimum wage. This Information Brief describes how MD PROMISE defined work experiences, highlights initial results, and shares promising practices to increase paid employment outcomes for youth SSI recipients.

### Maryland PROMISE Work Experiences

Work experiences are temporary training opportunities designed to expose young people to the typical day-to-day activities and expectations in work environments.

These opportunities allow youth to train and learn in authentic work settings where they can explore different jobs to determine their career direction. Work experiences can be a creative and flexible way to collaborate with employers to help youth develop new skills and positive work habits and behaviors. Table 1 outlines the benefits both youth and employers can gain from participating in work experiences.

Table 1: Work Experience Benefits

Benefits for YOUTH	Benefits for EMPLOYERS
Promote career exploration	Preview future workforce
Develop appropriate work behaviors	Develop potential workforce
Assess strengths and abilities	Make a time-limited commitment
Expand professional networks	Receive support mentoring youth workers
Inform career decision making	Enhance community partnerships and visibility

Contemporary research has found youth work experiences are an important factor in predicting adult employment (e.g., Carter et al. 2012; Wehman et al. 2014). MD PROMISE emphasized work not only as an intervention, but also as the desired long-term outcome for participating youth. MD PROMISE staff reinforced the focus on work and supported youth and families in overcoming their fears and concerns about work. The project defined unpaid work experiences to include brief and episodic activities, such as worksite tours, job shadowing, and informational interviews, as well as more intense experiences, such as volunteer work, service learning, or unpaid internships. Paid work experiences were defined as part- or full-time jobs, including

customized jobs, and paid internships. These paid work experiences included jobs in which wages were paid directly by the employer, by PROMISE, or by summer youth programs such as Baltimore Youth Works. By the end of the five-year project implementation, the target was to have 80% of the 997 youth who were receiving project services participate in at least one unpaid work experience, and 70% to have had a paid work experience. MD PROMISE exceeded both goals as outlined in Table 2.

### **Promising Practices**

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MD PROMISE maintained a concentrated focus on providing job development and placement services that led to targeted and personalized work experiences for participating youth. To achieve this, several strategies were implemented:

**Individualized job development.** MD PROMISE used a youth inventory (called a Positive Personal Profile) and job search plan to identify the youths’ interests, preferences and career goals. This process allowed staff to tailor the job search to fit the needs and interests of the youth.

**Employer outreach and networking.** MD PROMISE staff actively established and maintained ongoing relationships with employers by conducting informational interviews, participating in local business organizations, and using family, staff and professional networks.

**Established numeric targets for staff.** MD PROMISE set clear expectations to ensure fidelity to the intervention and achievement of the program goals. Numeric goals for staff contacts with employers and placements of

participants in unpaid and paid work experiences were specified and monitored.

Table 2: MD PROMISE Work Experience Participation

Work Experience Participation	Number N=997	% Participation
Participated in at least 1 work experience (paid or unpaid)	814	82%
Participated in at least 1 unpaid work experience	806	81%
Participated in more than 1 unpaid work experience	417	42%
Participated in at least 1 paid work experience	724	73%
Participated in at least 1 unpaid and 1 paid work experience	716	72%
More than 1 paid work experience	710	71%

**Collaborated with schools and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR).** Through partnerships with local education agencies and VR, MD PROMISE staff jointly planned, developed, and facilitated work experiences for youth. These work experiences allowed opportunities for both schools and VR to effectively address federal legislative requirements (e.g., IDEA and WIOA) while providing quality career experiences and opportunities.

### Conclusion

MD PROMISE implemented an intensive individualized approach to develop youth work experiences. PROMISE staff followed a systematic process that incorporated youth-centric, asset-driven, and business-benefit

strategies to plan, develop, and facilitate quality work experiences for study participants. Staff were held to clear fidelity implementation standards, quality service expectations and service delivery goals with an emphasis on employment. Coordination with school and other community programs helped to strengthen the connection between work experiences, learning, and skill building while exploring possible career paths and enhancing career awareness. As a result, a very high percentage of youth who participated in MD PROMISE were exposed to both unpaid and paid work experiences. MD PROMISE will be following these youth to determine how these experiences may influence their adult employment success.

### References

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