

Evaluation Brief

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Association of Competency-based Training on Maryland PROMISE Employment Specialist Job Performance and Job Tenure

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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.

Introduction

Maryland PROMISE (“Promoting Readiness of Minors on Supplemental Security Income”), a five-year, randomized controlled trial,¹ evaluated the effectiveness of an experimental multicomponent service program for improving employment, education, and financial outcomes for youth with disabilities and their families receiving SSI benefits. The Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD) designed and implemented the Maryland PROMISE service program. Way Station, Inc., a community-based program located in Frederick, Maryland, delivered the program services. MDOD contracted with a third-party agency, TransCen, Inc., to provide field-based technical assistance to Way Station staff to maximize fidelity of program implementation and service delivery to the Maryland PROMISE program model standards. Youth and their families were recruited enrolled between April 2014 and February 2016 and were randomly assigned in a 1:1 ratio to PROMISE program services (n = 997) and to control (usual services) (n = 1009).

¹ Funded by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2013. Study completed on September 30, 2018.

The Maryland PROMISE Intervention

The Maryland PROMISE program provided four key services: (a) assertive case management; (b) career and work-based learning experiences; (c) benefits counseling and financial literacy services; and (d) family training for supporting youth’s attainment of education and employment goals. Operating statewide in five geographic regions (Baltimore City, Eastern Maryland, Northern Maryland, Southern Maryland, and Western Maryland), 27 intervention teams, each staffed with a family employment specialist, a case manager, and a benefits counselor, delivered these key services. In coordination with team members, employment specialists developed and secured employment-related experiences for youth. In real-time, the PROMISE management team and the TransCen technical assistance staff monitored and verified that the intervention teams achieved and maintained high fidelity to program model standards, by tracking patterns of service delivery recorded by service providers into an electronic management information system (MIS) (Luecking, Crane, Gingerich, & Morris in press).²

² Luecking, R., Crane, K., Gingerich, J., & Morris, T. (in press). Intervention fidelity in a large-scale model

Employment Specialists Performance and Job Tenure. To increase the number and quality of community-based work experiences for youth, the management team required employment specialists to complete a 40-hour standardized training program building skills in developing and obtaining work-based experiences and competitive jobs for individuals with disabilities. The training program, developed by the *Association for Community Rehabilitation Education's (ACRE)* and endorsed by the *Association for Persons in Supported Employment (APSE)*, was delivered by ACRE-certified trainers to employment specialists. This *Brief* reports our assessment about whether receipt of ACRE training by employment specialists was associated with improvements in their job performance and longer job tenure, and addressed the following three questions:

1. Did Maryland PROMISE employment specialists place more youth into *work-based experiences* after completing ACRE training compared to those who did not receive training?
2. Did Maryland PROMISE employment specialists help youth to obtain more *competitive jobs* after completing ACRE training compared to those who did not receive training?
3. Was *job tenure* greater for employment specialists who completing ACRE training compared to those who did not receive training?

We hope this *Brief's* findings will help state administrators and policy makers decide whether or not to invest in specialty training to expand employment specialists' competencies for enhancing youth employment outcomes,

demonstration project: Lessons from Maryland PROMISE. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*.

and to increase job tenure of these highly-specialized professionals, who are very expensive to replace (Bogenschutz, Nord, & Hewitt, 2015).³

Methods

Employment Specialists. Employment specialists served youth and families as members of one of the 27 service teams operating in one of the State's five geographic regions each overseen by an area supervisor. At termination of enrollment in February 2016, each intervention team managed an average caseload of 44 youth. We report on 55 Maryland PROMISE employment specialists, 30 of whom completed ACRE training in one of three cohorts (September 2016; February 2017; September 2017). They earned the *ACRE National Certificate* and became eligible to sit for the national *Certified Employment Service Professional (CESP) Exam*. MDOD covered all ACRE costs for trainers, materials, and CESP exam fees.

ACRE Training Components and Procedures. The ACRE training program covers 38 competencies organized into four domains: (a) core values and principles of employment services practice; (b) individualized assessment, and employment and career planning; (c) research into community job opportunities, and job development; and (d) workplace and related supports. Maryland PROMISE technical assistance staff, who were ACRE-certified trainers, conducted training through interactive workshops (30 hours) followed by field-based experiences for practicing and receiving instructor feedback on new skills acquired in workshops (10 hours).

³ Bogenschutz, M., Nord, D., & Hewitt, A. (2015). Competency-based training and worker turnover in community supports for people with IDD: Results from a group randomized controlled study. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 53(3), 182–195. <https://doi.org/10.1352/1934-9556-53.3.182>

Data Analysis. *Research Questions #1 and #2:* Using data from the Maryland PROMISE MIS, we compared the performance of employment specialists who completed *ACRE* training (n = 30, aggregated across the three training cohorts) to those who did not receive training (n = 25) on two criteria: (a) number of youth placed into *work-based experiences* by each employment specialist per month aggregated across all youth in his/her caseload, and (b) number of *competitive jobs* obtained by youth with help from each employment specialist per month aggregated across all youth on his/her caseload. *Work-based experiences* are located in community-based employment settings, where youth participate in activities teaching them about careers and appropriate worksite behaviors. Activities range from the brief and episodic, such as worksite tours, job shadowing, and informational interviews, to the more intense, such as volunteer work, service learning, and internships. *Competitive jobs*, including customized employment, are full- or part-time positions for which employers directly hire youth, pay at least minimum wage, and offer benefits similar to those for employees without disabilities.

Research Question #3: Using Way Station's staff employment records, we compared employment specialists who completed *ACRE* training (n = 30, aggregated across the three cohorts) to those who did not receive training (n = 25) on job tenure defined as the number of days since the employment specialist's date of hire.

Findings: Association of Training with Performance and Tenure

Job Performance. The *ACRE*-trained employment specialists secured a median of 1.65 *work-based experiences* placements for youth per month, which moderately exceeded a median of 0.37

placements per month secured by employment specialists who did not receive training (Mdn = 1.65, interquartile range [IQR] = 1.01 – 2.26 vs. Mdn = 0.38, IQR = 0.13 – 1.10, U = 145, z = -3.89, p = .000, effect size [ES] = 0.28).

The *ACRE*-trained employment specialists helped youth obtain a median of 0.38 *competitive jobs* per month, which slightly exceeded a median of 0.12 competitive jobs by employment specialists who did not receive training (Mdn = 0.38, IQR = 0.21 – 0.63 versus Mdn = 0.12, IQR = 0.00 – 0.34, U = 186, z = -3.21, p = .001, ES = 0.19).

Job Tenure. The median tenure of 903 days for *ACRE*-trained employment specialists greatly exceeded the median tenure of 320 days for those who did not receive training (Mdn = 903, IQR = 457 - 1253 versus Mdn = 320, IQR = 209 - 472, U = 126, z = -4.22, p = .000, ES = 0.33).

Discussion

First, we found that completion of a standardized in-house competency-based training program, offered in conjunction with field-based technical assistance, was associated with improved employment specialists' improved performance on helping youth secure *work-based experiences* and obtain *competitive jobs*. Like Maryland PROMISE, the Youth Transition Demonstration project (YTD; Fraker et. al., 2018)⁴ invested in targeted employment-centered training coupled with real-time field-based support to front line staff and found similar associations of training and technical assistance with performance. However, we are not aware of any rigorously-designed studies in the disability field that have examined effects of standardized competency-based training curricula on improving staff performance on employment outcomes.

⁴ Fraker, T. M., Crane, K. T., Honeycutt, T. C., Luecking, R. G., Mamun, A. A., & O'Day, B. L. (2018). The youth transition demonstration project in

Miami, Florida: Design, implementation, and three-year impacts. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 48(1), 79–91. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-170917>

Second, we found that completion of the training program was associated with employment specialists' increased job tenure. To date, only one study in the disability field, a group randomized controlled trial of over 500 participating providers employed across nearly 50 organizations, has tested the effects of standardized field-based training and technical assistance on extending direct service staff job tenure (Bogenschutz et al., 2015).⁵ This study found significant decreases in annual direct service staff turnover while controlling for multiple site and provider factors.

Thus, our findings offer tentative evidence for benefits in investing in standardized competency-based training for extending staff job tenure, perhaps reflecting staff commitment to their employing organizations (Bogenschutz et al., 2015)⁶ (Hewitt & Larson, 2007).⁷ Some studies have observed that offering training communicates to employees the high value the organization places upon their efforts toward improving their professional skills and obtaining additional credentials (e.g., Schmidt, 2007).⁸ Further, in a separate Maryland PROMISE survey study, we found that a majority of staff endorsed *ACRE* competency-based training with field-based technical assistance as one of the most valued types of training methods for improving expanding their competencies with job development and placement.⁹

Limitations & Future Work

Although this pre- and post-test ex post facto study found systematic associations between completion of targeted training by employment specialists, and their enhanced performance on

youth employment outcomes, and increased job tenure, we cannot establish a causal relationship between training, and employment outcomes and tenure. Further, although flaws in this study's design, such as selection bias and provider maturation, are partially controlled by this study's measurement of outcomes pre- and post-training, they should nonetheless be considered as threats to generalizability of study findings.

Despite these limitations, our exploratory findings of positive associations between employment specialists' improved performance on youth employment outcomes and increased job tenure AND completing a systematic, manualized, and replicable competency-based training program coupled with field-based intensive technical assistance, merit the building of more rigorous evaluations of training effectiveness on provider job performance and job tenure into future trials of multicomponent service programs for helping youth with disabilities on education and employment outcomes.

Implications for Research and Practice

With evolving federal requirements for delivering work-based learning experiences to transition age youth with disabilities (e.g., WIOA, IDEA), many state and local policymakers are seeking ways to build staff service capacity to meet these requirements. Given that most of Maryland PROMISE program's direct service staff lacked advanced employment-related competencies for achieving the employment outcomes for youth, significant investment in professional training was necessary to elevate

⁵ See note #2.

⁶ See note #3

⁷ Hewitt, A., & Larson, S. (2007). The direct support workforce in community supports to individuals with developmental disabilities: issues, implications, and promising practices. *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*

Research Reviews, 13(2), 178–187.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/mrdd.20151>

⁸ Schmidt S. (2007). The relationship between satisfaction with training and job satisfaction. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 18, 488-498. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.1216>.

⁹Allison, M. (2018) Maryland PROMISE Focus Group Report. (November 25, 2018)

competencies toward the state-of-the-art. Yet, such training that Maryland PROMISE's staff required is common to programs serving transition-aged youth nationwide. For example, Mazzotti and Plotner (2016)¹⁰ recently conducted a five-state survey of 592 transition service providers from fields of education, vocational rehabilitation, and workforce development, and found that just over half (52%) seldomly or never received training for delivering evidence-based employment services. This alarming finding calls for more federal, state, and local funding to provide transition service professionals on-going training in evidence-based employment practices, especially in placing youth with disabilities into work-based learning experiences (e.g., Boardman et al., 2005;¹¹ Morningstar & Benitez, 2013).¹²

Conclusion

In a five-year, randomized controlled trial testing the effectiveness of a multicomponent service program for improving the educational, employment, and financial outcomes of youth with disabilities, Maryland PROMISE employment specialists completed a standardized competency-based training program for building competencies for helping youth with disabilities obtain work-based experiences and competitive jobs, while maximizing fidelity of service delivery to program model standards.

We tentatively recommend that investing into systematic competency-based training to direct service staff for improving youth employment outcomes and for extending their job tenure. Future randomized trials of programs for helping youth with disabilities should integrate into the trial design a formal evaluation of the effectiveness of training on provider performance and job tenure.

For more information on MD PROMISE visit:
www.mdtransition.org

¹⁰ Morningstar, M. E., & Benitez, D. T. (2013). Teacher training matters: The results of a multistate survey of secondary special educators regarding transition from school to adulthood. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 36(1), 51–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406412474022>

¹¹ Boardman, A. G., Argüelles, M. E., Vaughn, S., Hughes, M. T., & Klingner, J. (2005). Special

education teachers' views of research-based practices. *Journal of Special Education*, 39(3), 168–180.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00224669050390030401>

¹² See note #9