

A PEEK INSIDE THE NEWSLETTER

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A Message from TPS Project Director Jennifer Stewart

In October, I had the opportunity to travel to Washington DC and join the 4 other states (Maryland, California, Maine, and Vermont) that Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) selected for the Disability Innovation Work-Based Learning Demonstration Grant funding. The conference fostered cross-state learning, particularly around how to think about work-based learning experiences and how to engage students and employers. The major takeaway was that collaboration and partnerships are essential for creating student opportunities. Additionally, all state VR agency staff members agreed that working with students is different from working with adults. It requires time and engaging with many stakeholders, such as schools and families; all are necessary to create a successful transition from high school to employment.



MRC's TPS project stood out with some key differences from the other 4 states. While other states are focusing their efforts on providing 2 work-based learning experiences for students, our TPS project uses an approach that is more individualized and time intensive. The TPS model engages a Career Discovery Team and builds the work experiences into a comprehensive system of individualized supports.

The TPS model uses multiple engagement strategies, including rapid access to services, peer support, and a multi-disciplinary team to provide comprehensive services, such as transportation, family support, job readiness training, and independent living skills. We are seeing few dropouts from the TPS data so far, suggesting the TPS model could have a higher retention rate than MRC's usual rate for transition students.

As Massachusetts and the other states continue moving our grant projects along, we look forward to sharing lessons learned and discovering new strategies for supporting students' work-based learning experiences.

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Travel Training with TPS

Bronson is a Transition Pathway Services (TPS) student who has participated in two workplace readiness trainings as well as two work-based learning experiences, including an externship program with CVS.

To access these opportunities, Bronson learned how to ride the public bus through one-on-one travel training, a key service of the TPS program. Travel training provides students with practice paying fares, crossing the street safely, reading signage, planning trips, using travel apps, paying attention to personal safety, and responding to the unexpected.

TPS students also receive travel tools like route cards, emergency contact cards, lanyards, and personalized bus schedules.

Although Bronson knew how to ride the bus to school, he was interested in improving his travel skills to go more places without getting lost. So Bronson's vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor referred him to Teri Koopman, TPS Transportation Coordinator for Travel Training Services.

Teri met with Bronson and his mother to share more about the program, collect additional information, and discuss destinations he wanted to practice riding to. She then assisted Bronson in getting a statewide discount Transportation Access Pass (TAP Card), for which all MRC consumers are eligible.

During Bronson's first travel training session, he learned how to travel to Union Station in Springfield, MA to get his TAP Card. His next sessions entailed becoming even more familiar with the bus route he took to school, and traveling to destinations that were farther away, including Walmart and the Big Y supermarket. Each session slowly incorporated new skills. Bronson learned the transfer process and practiced riding two buses to one destination.

Using skills gained in travel training, Bronson participated in the CVS Externship Program. This is a joint initiative conducted with the Regional Employment Collaborative that combines classroom and on-the-job training. Bronson rode the bus to his externship site and to the MRC Springfield Office for workplace readiness training.

Through travel training, students gain confidence and become more independent. Teri Koopman said, "Bronson is an enthusiastic rider and employee. Learning how to navigate the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA) system has increased his self-confidence and independence. And yes, he now travels to new destinations on his own!"

"Although Bronson knew how to ride the bus to school, he was interested in improving his travel skills to go more places without getting lost."



Transportation Coordination

Transportation Coordination is one of the services offered in the TPS model. Through Transportation Coordination, students can receive assistance in studying for their learner's permit, applying for paratransit van services, or learning how to ride fixed-route public transportation via one-on-one Travel Training.

Transportation Coordinator Teri Koopman explains that the process for enrolling in Travel Training is simple: when she finds out a TPS student is interested, she identifies the most appropriate Travel Training provider and makes a referral. Providers include Public Transit Authorities, ILC Peer Mentors, and others (including Teri herself).

Learning how to travel safely and independently opens up opportunities: it enhances freedom, mobility, and independence; provides access to safe and low-cost transportation; increases self-confidence; and enables students to get out into the community and explore other interests. As Teri puts it, "One of the best things about travel training is how you feel about yourself in the end. Once you learn how to get out and use public transportation and get someplace on your own, by yourself, you feel awesome. You have increased self-confidence and the freedom to go out and about. And you are able to go to things outside of work that you might be interested in going to."

Success with a Career Discovery Team in Roxbury

The Career Discovery Team (CDT) forms the core structure of the TPS model and is integral to planning, reviewing, and providing the services and work experiences that will help the students succeed. Tyrell “TK” Kizzie, a student at Boston Community Leadership Academy, made excellent use of the resources and supports available to him through his CDT.

Although TK is known for his friendliness and his exemplary work ethic, his CDT helped to identify his strengths and collaborated to address challenges to provide a network of support that ensured his success. TK’s CDT includes family members, school supports, peer mentors, and community partners whom he has identified to help him in his transition planning.

TK used the INFOR Assessment to identify some of his values and preferences in how he learns and works best. He was connected with a peer mentor at the Boston Center for Independent Living to consider work-based learning opportunities that would meet his preferences.

In the spring of 2018, TK participated in Partners for Youth with Disabilities’ YEP Career Readiness program, through which he completed 7 weeks of classes in professional skills such as communication, interviewing, and resume building, followed by an internship at the State Street Corporation. The TPS transportation coordinator set TK up with MBTA travel training so that he could travel independently to and from his internship.

Impressed with TK’s work ethic, his internship supervisor at State Street invited him to return for a summer internship. Also, TK spoke at a Boston Institute for Careers and Networking event hosted at State Street.

Currently, TK’s CDT is helping him to apply for a part-time job and to set his plans for after graduation this spring. TK’s goal is to attend college and study mathematics. He would like to work in the field of engineering. TK and his mom are working with an MRC transition benefits counselor to ensure that he understands the supports available as he considers his post-high-school plans.

The CDT members are proud of TK’s accomplishments and look forward to being a part of his continued successes.



Career Discovery Teams

The TPS model comprises 10 service components, most of which are available to other MRC customers. However, the TPS model differs in its coordinated team approach to providing these services, through the use of Career Discovery Teams (CDTs). Each TPS student has their own CDT, which develops and carries out a plan that focuses on the student’s individual interests, needs, and goals.

The CDT members can include:

- TPS counselor
- Student
- Parents/guardians
- School personnel
- Travel coordinator
- Other community partners as needed

CDT members work with students to identify career goals, collaborate on providing job opportunities, and brainstorm strategies to address challenges. The coordinated team approach is designed to help create successful employment and post-secondary educational outcomes, and the TPS project is already seeing the benefits of this model for students like TK.

“Due to TK’s work ethic and collaboration from his CDT, his internship supervisor at State Street invited him to return for summer internship.”

Isabel the Makeup Artist

Work-based learning experiences offer more than opportunities to gain job skills. This type of hands-on learning also offers a chance to explore different career paths. Aisha Nakazibwe, TPS Counselor in the Lawrence office, explains how her student Isabel turned her passion for makeup into a career goal. It started with Isabel's Career Discovery Team, a central part of the TPS model (see page 3). "In our first team meeting," Nakazibwe recalls, "we were discussing Isabel's hobbies and she told me that she loves makeup."

Working with her TPS counselor, Isabel and her mom signed-up for free makeup classes at Sephora. Nakazibwe explains, "Since I love makeup, I knew where she could start to take free classes so that she can improve her technique. We went on the Sephora website, and I showed Isabel and her mom how to sign up for classes."

Attending the 2-hour training class at Sephora gave Isabel the opportunity to experience the work environment and to learn about the training needed to become a makeup artist. Nakazibwe describes Isabel's experience: "She's a girl who loves makeup, so she liked the products we used but mainly she loved that she learned how to do a 'smoky eye.'" Isabel's enthusiasm and engagement in the class were evident. Her mother and Nakazibwe were pleased to see Isabel making conversation and sharing products with the other 10 or so participants. Isabel even approached a Sephora representative to ask what she would need in order to work there. Nakazibwe noted, "In that moment we realized she needs to work in such an environment because she looked happy and comfortable, like she belongs there."

Drawing from these work-based learning experiences, Isabel and her TPS Career Discovery Team are planning her next steps. After high school, Isabel would like to continue her training as a makeup artist. To learn more about this training, Nakazibwe and Isabel visited Alicia's Makeup Academy in Haverhill and met with the owner, who walked Isabel through what she needed to take the professional makeup classes. Isabel plans to start a training program this fall or early next year.



Work-Based Learning Experiences

MRC has joined other state vocational rehabilitation agencies in using innovative approaches to help students transition to work or postsecondary education. One innovation is to emphasize work-based learning as a continuum of experiences that support a student's skill development. Work-based Learning Experiences (WBLEs) provide students with knowledge and skills in real-life employment settings that may offer future career opportunities. Because they are designed to meet the student's needs, interests, and ability level, they may change as students learn about the world of work.

WBLEs may include a spectrum of opportunities, such as:

- Workplace tours or field trips
- Informational interviews
- Job shadowing
- Service learning or volunteering
- Internships
- Paid work experience

WBLEs are a core element of the TPS model. While the definition of WBLE is broad, MRC recognizes the value of paid work experiences as a priority. Therefore, MRC has set a high standard for WBLEs for TPS students to have at least two WBLEs, with one of those experiences being paid.

"Isabel turned her passion for makeup into a career goal."

Putting the “Pieces of the Puzzle Together”: Peer Mentoring and TPS

Peer Mentoring is an important component of the TPS Project that helps students to achieve their independent living goals. MRC has developed community partnerships with Boston Center for Independent Living, Stavros Center, and Northeast Independent Living Program to provide peer mentoring to students in the TPS project. Nathan Hughes, a Peer Mentor with the Northeast Independent Living Program in Lawrence, discussed the importance of peer mentoring and the TPS Project for students with disabilities.



Hughes’ inspiration for working with students with disabilities began with his experiences navigating social expectations and academic challenges as a youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Hughes explains, “And it was actually really difficult for me when I was growing up trying to adjust to the social expectations and combination with the academic expectations of the school curriculum. So I, when I was growing up [thinking about] I wanted to do. [I wanted to] make it easier for other kids who were more like me.”

Peer Mentoring offers students the opportunity to learn from their mentors about independent living skills and navigating the transition from high school into adulthood. Peer Mentors assist students with learning a wide range of skills like household chores, job etiquette, navigating the community, and self-advocacy.

Hughes says, “Peer mentoring is really important because these students, from my experience, are more likely to listen to adults or peers who have been there, who have dealt with similar challenges and have had similar difficulties in their life.... Having the support of someone who clearly knows where they’re at and knows what some of their difficulties in life might be...is really invaluable in terms of support. And that’s something that I feel that I have been able to provide for a lot of my students.”

Peer Mentoring as a component of the TPS Project model builds supports around the unique needs of students. Hughes states, “One of the things that I really enjoy about the TPS program is getting to know the needs of each individual student...[and] trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together in order to determine what might be best for that particular student. So each student has their own strengths, they have their own weaknesses, they have backgrounds that vary tremendously. And so trying to put those puzzle pieces together is something that I really enjoy.”

TPS Project model aims to provide students with the community supports they need to become successful. Hughes points out, “The ultimate goal of TPS is for students to either obtain competitive employment or be involved in a post-secondary education program. And just trying to help the stars line up, and make sure that the students are getting exactly what they need, is something that I really enjoy. [It] takes a lot of work, a lot of hard work, and once it pays off it feels really good.”

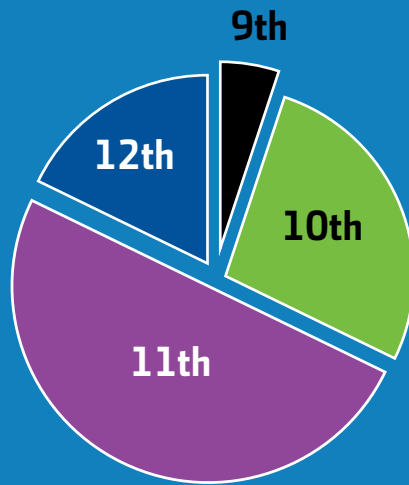
“One of the things that I really enjoy about the TPS program is getting to know the needs of each individual student...[and] trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together in order to determine what might be best for that particular student.”

TPS BY THE NUMBERS

Number of students enrolled in TPS* = **192**



▶ Half of the students enrolled in TPS are in the 11th grade.



▶ Racial and ethnic diversity is high within the TPS project, with 73.4% students of color enrolled.

*as of 3/9/2019

THE TOP 5 SERVICES PROVIDED TO STUDENTS

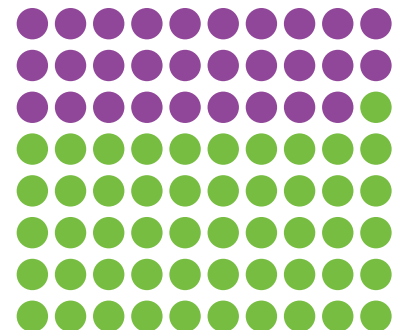
- ▶ Vocational Counseling
- ▶ Workplace Readiness Training
- ▶ Peer Mentoring
- ▶ Transportation Coordination
- ▶ Work - Based Learning Experience



WORK - BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES (WBLE)

80 students have completed their first WBLE.

51 of these WBLEs were paid.



CAREER DISCOVERY TEAMS

86% of TPS students have had at least one CDT meeting.

