



Interview with Curtis Richards

**Director, Center for Workforce Development, Institute for Educational Leadership
Director, National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth)**

[Announcer] This podcast was presented by the NTAR Leadership Center, helping state leaders help adults with disabilities to employment and better economic opportunities through collaboration, innovation, and change.

[Laurie Harrington] Welcome to Research In Brief, a feature podcast of the NTAR Leadership Center, I'm your host Laurie Harrington. Curtis Richards is Director of the Center for Workforce Development at IEL; he is a nationally recognized leader in the disability community. Richard serves as a lead technical assistance provider for the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. With support from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth is a national technical assistance center focused on assisting the workforce development system to better serve youth; including youths with disabilities. Welcome to our podcast Curtis. Can you please tell us about the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disabilities for Youth?

[Curtis Richards] Yep, I run the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. We're in our 9th year, and are a technical assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. When ODEP was created a decade ago to try to help raise high level issues around disability, the lack of disability employment, disability participation in the workforce, they decided that they needed to put out a couple of technical assistance centers; one focusing on young people, and then another one focusing on, on issues around adults. We have been the TA center focused on youth. We initially started with an approach that said there's been a lot of research and a lot of demonstration projects over the last 25-30 years around young people, including the whole school to work movement that was quite, quite big in this country. And so we sort of pulled all the research together and said; what do we know that all youth need, and particularly what do we know around youth with disabilities? We call it our guidepost for success. And it's really just a framework for making sure that as we're looking at what young people need to move from school to work, from home to community, from, you know, into additional education or, you know, just whole transition from adolescence to adulthood. What are the sorts of things you need to zero in on and make sure that you're connecting to, to get them the kind of supports that they need? And, you know, really it's, it's sort of the holistic approach to the set of things that are around education, schooling, set of things around getting ready to go to work, set of things around youth development and leadership, around connections to other programs and adult services, and, and a whole set of family issues. And we've actually taken that work over the course of our time and dug deeper into additional disability categories of learning disabilities, youth with mental health needs. We're now working on youth with truly significant disabilities, the 1-2%. And we, we've also gone deeper into a couple of different systems, that is youth who are transitioning from, who are involved in the foster care system, in transitioning out of that system as they reach adulthood, as well as youth that are involved in the juvenile justice system.



[Laurie Harrington] Describe the model you use to provide your technical assistance services, and who's the audience for your services?

[Curtis Richards] That's a great question. We're, we sort of view our audiences what we facetiously call the western world. Because, you know, when, when you think about the workforce development system, you know, it's not just the employers and the job seekers, it's also a whole host of provider organizations that, you know, all the one stops. It's the people who are involved in running workforce investment boards, and running departments of labor, and you know, all of the labor market information market folks, and a whole host of people. But when you're talking about youth you're also talking about school people that often times don't, people don't think about in the context of a workforce system. And our whole approach is to try to connect across these systems. So, you know, we will be having conversations with a special ed director in a state or in a, in a local jurisdiction, or a workforce board person, or, you know, we do a lot of conferences that are transition focused conferences. You know, so, it, and we also view as, you know, our primary, or some of our primary audiences, as young people themselves trying, you know, we develop a lot of tools to help young people themselves learn how to navigate the systems and their families.

[Laurie Harrington] In your opinion, what are the challenges of the workforce development system in facing youth with disabilities? And how does your center's services address those challenges?

[Curtis Richards] Is that we don't have any real sense of a profession engrained in folks yet. I mean you're beginning to see it, and you have a professional association, you know, the National Association Workforce Development Professionals, NAWDP, you know. But I think we, we clearly see that there's a need to, to, to bring the workforce, the folks inside the workforce development systems together as a profession. You know, when you think about how somebody falls into a job in a, in a one stop or in a youth serving organization, you know, it's not necessarily a program you go to college for, and you get your degree in, and you wind up then, you know, being this great youth service person. A lot of people tend to just stumble into these jobs. So we spend a lot of time thinking about doing the research and, and, and really trying to grow a set of core competencies for youth service professionals. We call it our youth service professional's knowledge skills and abilities initiative. And, you know, I think you're really beginning to see some traction here. You're, you're seeing a number of, workforce development programs develop inside of colleges and universities. You're seeing a little more emphasis on developing some certificate programs. You're seeing workforce boards begin to get interested in doing, sending folks to professional development. So we're even beginning to see some traction in the conversations around reauthorizing the Workforce Investments Act itself around emphasizing professional development. And it's, it's a big issue. In the vocation rehabilitation world there is a big emphasis on, you know, on, on highly qualified rehab professionals in the education world there is. But there hasn't really been as much of an emphasis in that arena in the workforce development system itself. So hopefully we'll see some movement there in reauthorization. Probably another really big challenge that folks face in terms of serving young people with disabilities is, is sort of cross systems knowledge. Right? You come out of, a young person with a disability is in special education that has its own set of eligibility criteria, and its



own set of supports and services that they're required and authorized and funded to be able to provide. And, you know, then you move into the adult system, whether it's a mental health system, whether it's, you know, whether it's even just, you know, sort of once you leave the point of school, you know, you leave the world of entitlement and, and move into, you know, the adult world, you know, where you sort of have to fend for yourself and you then have protections, disability rights protections that you need to know about and those sorts of things. And so you know, we believe and have seen that one of the biggest issues is getting these systems to understand each other. And a lot of our work, a number of our guides, we have very content rich materials on our website, a lot of our guides spend a lot of energy just getting people to understand each other's language, each other's eligibility rules, each others, you know, the, the, way that the, you can blend and braid these programs and services and funding streams together to be able to serve youth. It's not easy. It takes some time to study. It takes some initiative. It really takes sitting down and, you know, rolling up your sleeves, and working together across systems.

[Laurie Harrington] Can you describe for us your work on evaluating individualized learning plans?

[Curtis Richards] We're involved right now in a strand of work that's a rather big piece of our effort in the current couple of years. And it's a longitudinal study of, of individualized learning plans. We now have in this country over half of the states have mandated either by legislation or, or, or by decree of a board of education, a requirement that all students who are moving towards graduation need to have an individualized learning plan, a graduation plan. They're called different things in different states. And we are actually in four states doing an in-depth longitudinal study of how effective these plans are in helping move young people through high school toward collage, toward careers, including young people with disabilities. It's a big piece of the research work. This hasn't been done yet anywhere that we're aware of. And we're already beginning to see some very positive implications of these plans, including young people themselves being very engaged in developing them, their families being engaged in developing them. So it's something to, to stay tuned to.

[Laurie Harrington] Thank you Curtis Richards for speaking with us today. I've been talking today with Curtis Richards, the Director of the Center for Workforce Development at IEL about the work of the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. This is Laurie Harrington for Research in Brief with the NTAR Leadership Center. For more information about the NTAR Leadership Center and its research activities, visit www.NTARCenter.org.

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