

# WIA Learning Exchange for Youth Systems

## August 1, 2002 - September 30, 2003



### Project Overview

In April of 2002, the General Accounting Office (GAO) submitted a report to Congress outlining the challenges faced by state and local Workforce Investment Act (WIA) youth program implementers. To address these challenges, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC), and DTI Associates, in collaboration with the Department of Labor (DOL) Office of Youth Services (the Learning Exchange team), developed a series of WIA Learning Exchanges for Youth Systems (LEX). The Exchanges, or technical assistance seminars, were designed to meet three objectives. First, the Exchanges addressed the three areas of youth programming identified by the GAO as needing improvement: 1) recruitment and retention of out-of-school youth; 2) strengthening the connection among WIA partners, particularly between the education and workforce communities; and 3) documenting competencies and gains through appropriate assessments and credentials. Second, the Exchanges identified and promoted the exchange of promising practices among local and state workforce investment areas that support successful WIA youth programs. Third, the Exchanges were specifically designed to deliver system-wide technical assistance that actively engaged the participants through structured visits to exemplary WIA sites, exchange of promising practices, and strategic planning.

The WIA Learning Exchanges for Youth Systems were designed to stimulate a rich professional development experience, grounded in peer-to-peer learning and enhanced by demonstrations at an exemplary host site and youth employment programs. The meeting format challenged the traditional, passive mode of learning both by convening

**"Before, there was a tendency to stick to the status quo. The Exchange really got us to put more thought into our Youth Services."**

**Mississippi Participant**

self-directed roundtable conversations between local practitioners and policymakers, and by examining how participants could apply promising and effective youth service delivery sites and system practices at their own centers.

A team structure was chosen in order to increase commitment to implementation of newly learned strategies, which were translated into action plans. Team composition was strategically determined with the preferred team consisting of:

- A Youth Council member (preferably the Youth Council Chair);
- A Youth Council Program staff person; and
- The Executive Director of the Local Workforce Investment Board.

Teams learned how to focus their resources on serving out-of-school youth and how to increase program accountability by improving outcomes in the three areas identified by the GAO. The overwhelming majority of participants used this information to improve their systems and asked for additional LEX opportunities. Additionally, the peer learning approach allowed each team to customize the Exchange lessons learned to meet individual market-driven needs. LEXs were held in New Haven, CT; Jacksonville, FL; Golden, CO; Long Beach, CA; Bloomington, MN; Butler, PA and Yakima, WA, from December 2002 - April 2003.

## Key Findings

Local workforce teams identified retaining and recruiting out-of-school youth as their most critical need. In response to this need, three key findings were identified: 1) the importance of quality programming and the need to use PEPNet criteria as a continuous improvement tool; 2) the significance of using youth as resources in the programs and on the youth councils as a retention tool and as a key strategy to recruit peers; and 3) the vital need for financial supports that are tied to high expectations. These primary findings were underscored in all the LEXs and echoed in the action plans developed by state/local teams.

### Impact of the Learning Exchange on the WIA System for Youth

To assess the impact to date on participants and systems, the Learning Exchange team called 38 teams following their participation in a LEX. Telephone interviews were conducted with 28 teams.

- 85% of those interviewed (24 of 28) have either started their action plan or implemented a practice learned at the LEX.
- Of the 15 teams that have implemented an action plan:
  - ◆ 13 report that the actions have improved their system.
  - ◆ 1 reports that it is too early to tell if it will improve the system.
  - ◆ 1 reports that it did not improve the system.
- Of the 9 teams that implemented a practice learned at the LEX:
  - ◆ 3 report they already see evidence of a positive impact on the system.
  - ◆ 6 believe it is too early to tell if it will have a positive effect.

The following list provides examples of action plan items adopted by state and local WIA youth program implementers:

#### *Statewide System Improvements*

- Integrating PEPNet criteria into state monitoring processes (NH and MA)
- Training front line workers to work with youth with disabilities (OH)
- Incorporating youth/customer feedback for better recruiting and retention (SD)

#### **Local Area Improvements**

##### *Recruiting and Retaining Out-of-School Youth (OSY)*

- Improved out-of-school youth services through mentoring and involving youth on the council. (Concentrated Employment Program, MT)
- Located new source of OSY referrals by broadening partnerships. (Hinds County WIB, MS)
- Circulated promising practices among local youth providers for serving OSY. (Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council, WA)
- Increased parental involvement to impact positive youth outcomes. (Stearns-Benton Employment & Training Council, MN)
- Unified marketing and outreach plan to improve youth programs across dispersed rural areas. (Southeast Minnesota WIB, MN)
- Created an orientation video to market youth programs at one-stops and in the community. (Mobile Works, Inc., AL)
- Initiated aftercare employment project for youth on probation. (Hennepin County Training and Employment Assistance, MN)
- Changed program design to use small cohort groups for peer support. (Coconino Career Center, AZ)
- Incorporated youth voice in designing this summer's WIA effort. (Gloucester County WIB, NJ)

### *Partnership Building*

- Revised RFP by awarding contracts to providers who share costs, resulting in lower program costs to WIA. (Central Mississippi Planning and Development District, MS)
- Improved partnership with educational system. (Hinds County WIB, MS)
- Initiated new partnership with Senior Corps of retired executives for a mentoring program. (Southwest Washington WDC, WA)
- Initiated new partnership with criminal justice department at Northern Arizona University for a mentoring program. (Coconino Career Center, AZ)

### *Improving Skill Attainment and Credentialing Efforts*

- Implemented new assessment for work readiness competencies showcased at LEX. (Southeast Minnesota WIB, MN)
- Modified how competencies were relayed to youth and parents by making competency levels explicit to everyone. (Stearns-Benton Employment & Training Council, MN)

### *Integrating PEPNet Criteria*

- Infused PEPNet criteria into their system by educating all partners about PEPNet. (Balance of State WIB, MT; Central MN Jobs & Training Services, MN)

### **The Learning Exchange as a Successful Technical Assistance Model**

#### *Participation*

- Attendance at all of the meetings, with the exception of Yakima, WA, exceeded our target participation level by 6% with the Exchanges hosting a total of 223 participants<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Usefulness of Learning Exchange components*

- 93% of participants thought that the peer-to-peer time was useful.

**"The LEX caused us to look harder at how we can form partnerships. Now, we are able to continue the same services at a lower WIA cost because we changed our contracting procedures."**

**Mississippi Participant**

- 86% of participants felt that the action-planning tool was useful.
- 79% of participants reported that the team time (time set aside to complete an action plan) was useful.

#### *Site Visits*

- 88% of participants felt that the site visits were a rich learning experience.

#### *Exposure to New Practices*

- At four of the Exchanges, participants were asked about their exposure to new practices. Seventy-eight (78) percent of participants felt that they were exposed to new practices during the Exchange.

#### *General*

- 88% of participants reported that the Learning Exchange would positively impact their daily program activities.
- 92% of participants reported that the Learning Exchange was a positive learning experience.
- 91% of participants would like to see the Learning Exchanges replicated as a technical assistance strategy in the future. (Many specified that they would like to see it continue on a regional basis.)

### **Promising Practices for Youth Programs**

The LEX teams shared many practices that address the three areas the GAO noted as needing improvement.

<sup>1</sup> The timeframe for the Yakima registration coincided with the war with Iraq, which resulted in lower than expected participation.

## Retention of Out-of-School Youth

Research over the past ten years into programs for vulnerable youth has outlined clear patterns in effective programming. The LEX practices correspond with five traits practiced by high quality youth development programs and supported by PEPNet criteria and AYPF's research. The strategies are categorized by:

- Quality Implementation;
- Youth as Resources;
- Caring Adults/Family Involvement;
- High Standards and Expectations, and;
- Financial Supports and Incentives.

### *Quality Implementation*

- Require a commitment from the youth.
- Develop leadership to establish a framework for structure.
- Build milestones and goals for the youth to aim towards.
- Incorporate various teaching techniques to reach various learning styles.

### *Youth as Resources*

- Seek feedback from OSY through focus groups.
- Give youth ownership in the program.
- Let youth discover solutions for program challenges.

### *Caring Adults and Family Involvement*

- Develop a cadre of coordinated, caring adults.
- Supplement core staff with mentors and resource people.
- Engage the family in many ways.

### *High Standards and Expectations*

- Have high expectations for SCANS skills, then translate them into high expectations for academics.

**"Now we are thinking more in terms of a system rather than just programs; we are looking at total youth development."**

**Ohio Participant**

- Tie any incentives (movie passes, store certificates, etc.) to meeting expectations, thereby emphasizing accountability.

### *Financial Supports and Incentives*

- Provide a stipend.
- Be an advocate for the youth with their employer.
- Set up an individual development account (IDA) for the youth.
- Be creative with incentives.

## Recruiting Out-of-School Youth

A program that produces positive outcomes for youth builds trust in the community. The Learning Exchanges Team learned that leveraging this trust with communities, schools and youth makes for a successful recruiting strategy for out-of-school youth.

### *Peers as prime marketing tool*

- Take recruiting efforts to the streets by having youth and staff go door to door telling their stories to parents, neighbors and youth. Once youth are invited to participate, follow-up with them multiple times to encourage their enrollment.
- Offer youth incentives to bring in referrals.
- Make finding a new recruit part of a graduation requirement.
- Reach youth by having past graduates come back, show their pay stubs, and talk about their successes.
- Have youth develop flyers, posters, cable access ads, radio spots, etc.

*Connect to schools immediately upon change of status of youth*

- Partner with schools to connect with youth just as they are dropping out or expelled.
- Hold some classes in the high school; make connections to raise visibility.
- Develop relationships with school counselors.
- Attend a school board meeting to see how transitions are handled; learn the process youth go through.
- Market to the school board and schools as being a partner that will provide support services to help them meet their goals under No Child Left Behind.

#### *Community partners*

- Identify credible adults (clergy, athletes, etc.) in the community and have them publicize the program.
- Develop a relationship with and give information to military recruiting offices so ineligible applicants (because they need at least a GED) can be referred to WIA.
- Sponsor community celebrations- involve the youth and families in planning.
- Another way to raise a program's visibility is to partner with recreational centers or a drop-in center.
- Place an ad on the movie screen at the local theater.

#### **Partnerships**

All of the local workforce areas that were visited had strong, extensive and long-term partnerships. Their definition of partners did not stop with the required youth council members, but extended to customer stakeholders such as the youth and their parents, an array of community and faith-based organizations, and businesses. The genuine interest in integrating all their voices for continuous improvement created a climate of trust that supported innovative and resourceful solutions for their youth system.

**"We have a clearer vision of what we are truly capable of and have been able to convince our staff of that potential."**

**Alabama Participant**

Each host workforce area had the commitment of the board's executive director squarely behind an innovative youth system. The alignment of board leadership and community involvement enabled a productive environment where all partners could share in the creation and refinement of a vision for their youth system.

#### *Strategies to facilitate partnerships are:*

- Providing a flexible RFP that values partners' cost sharing.
- Finding common ground for a vision.
- Delivering the vision to the community while listening to their needs and offerings.
- Giving recognition to partners.
- Being creative in scheduling meetings to maximize partner participation.

#### **Skill Attainments and Credentials**

##### *Measure Skill Attainment Frequently*

Defining and aligning assessments, skill attainments and credentials is a tricky balancing act. Local workforce areas want to set high expectations for credentials and skill attainments while still incorporating meaningful, yet realistic objectives for both older and younger youth. Developing a meaningful credential that employers can trust, while at the same time keeping youth engaged, is a challenge. To answer this challenge, programs integrated recognitions of youth when they attain a milestone in their pathway towards skill attainments and credentials. Intermediate and ongoing acknowledgement of skill advancement is one way to keep youth engaged in what typically is a long-term goal.

### *Employer Involvement in Defining Competencies*

Employer involvement in defining the workforce board's policies and expectations for skill competencies is critical in developing a local credential that designates a youth as being truly work ready. Employers voice their needs to the youth council during the development of learning objectives. Employers can also work directly with youth training providers such as community colleges to state explicitly expected competencies for credentials that are customized for the situation and the youth. Finally, the LEX revealed that powerful partnerships exist between WIBs and chambers of commerce, allowing large numbers of employers to engage in a conversation about needed competencies. WorkKeys is an assessment that fosters a common language around skill attainment so businesses, training and education providers and youth are aligned to cultivate an excellent workforce.

### *Staff Development and Tools Improve the Skill Attainment Process*

WIA mandates that local workforce boards develop their own policy and definitions of skill attainment and credentials in *basic skills, work readiness and occupational skills*. While the process for assessing skill gains is generally standard, local areas are becoming more sophisticated in the fluidity of transitioning youth and refined in finding accurate assessments and documentation.

- **Proper staff training** in documenting competencies ensures that performance standards are uniform across the system, thereby lending credibility to training and education efforts in the eyes of the community.
- **Proven assessment tools** can also strengthen the skill attainment process. An example of an assessment tool is the *Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan*. WIA case managers use the plan with the aid of employers to connect work experience to the classroom and to measure a skill gain. With this tool,

employers can align their needs with distinctive attainments; instructors can relate work experience to basic skill goals; and youth can assess many soft skills they may already have. In essence, the plan serves multiple purposes for various stakeholders while still aligning skill attainments with workforce board's goals and policies.

[http://www.doe.mass.edu/stc/wbl\\_resource/wblp.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/stc/wbl_resource/wblp.html)

- **Incentives** are another device to encourage youth to reach for skill attainments and credentials. Workforce boards that have approved their use allow youth and their counselors to decide which goals in their individual service strategy are tied to incentives. As an example, youth can receive a \$15 gift certificate for each objective accomplished and up to \$45 in gift certificates per year.

## **Conclusion**

The WIA Learning Exchanges met the three objectives stipulated by the Department of Labor. Perhaps most important, the Exchanges specifically, and successfully, helped state and local workforce teams to improve services in the areas enumerated by the GAO. Teams implemented a number of the promising practices as part of their action plans when they returned home, indicating a significant return on investment for this technical assistance strategy. Participant feedback and follow-up emphasized interest in the continuation of this type of assistance. In fact, Ohio and Washington will be replicating the LEX model as their new strategies for translating promising practices from one local area to other areas across the states. The Learning Exchange Team believes a continuation of the LEX model could further maximize DOL's return on investment now that policymakers and practitioners recognize this effort as a positive learning experience that translates into improved practices in the youth employment field.