A student from the Special Education District of Lake County learns about careers in science and technology from an employee volunteer mentor at Mitsubishi Electric Automation, Inc., Vernon Hills, IL

A Report on Strategy Recommendations to Empower Youth with Disabilities

*Developed at the M>PWR Chicago Summit*

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M>PWR Chicago:
A Report on Strategy Recommendations to Empower Youth with Disabilities

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Students with disabilities from Cal State Long Beach work with Mitsubishi Electric employee volunteers to install Mitsubishi Electric solar panels on the home of a low-income family with GRID Alternatives.
INTRODUCTION

Of the one in five working-age Americans with a disability, only 19% are engaged in the workforce compared to 68% of people without disabilities.¹

This is the stark reality that young people with disabilities and wounded warriors face as they seek to transition into the workforce. Given this reality, the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation Board of Directors recently adopted a new vision to: 

**empower youth with disabilities to lead productive lives through increased employment.**

To help reach this vision, the Foundation recently launched a five-year, $2 million M>PWR Initiative.

The M>PWR Initiative works through a network of National and Community Organizations to empower youth and veterans with disabilities by:

A. Investing in model employment projects that develop youth self-advocacy and employment skills, particularly for careers in science, technology, and the environment.

B. Creating and disseminating tools to break down barriers to employment and help employers learn how to successfully recruit, hire and retain employees with disabilities.

C. Convening a series of regional M>PWR Summits to initiate a dialogue with employers, service providers, youth, and community leaders on the transition needs of the community, to share effective employment models, and to create a plan of action.

The goal of the M>PWR Initiative is to develop cross-sector collaborations, share lessons learned, and scale-up promising practices to improve employment outcomes for youth and veterans with disabilities transitioning to the workforce in communities throughout the U.S.

About The Foundation

Since its inception in 1991, the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation has been dedicated to helping youth with disabilities maximize their potential and participation in society. Established by the Mitsubishi Electric Corporation of Japan and the Mitsubishi Electric US group companies, the Foundation supports national grant programs and employee volunteer programs across the United States to make Changes for the Better for youth with disabilities. To date, the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation and Mitsubishi Electric’s employee volunteers have invested $14 million and more than 40,000 volunteer hours in the U.S.

Through the launch of the **M>PWR Initiative**, the Foundation seeks to extend its reach by harnessing the power of Mitsubishi Electric’s people, products and philanthropic efforts – along with the power of our grantees and their supporters – to make a greater impact by empowering young people with disabilities to lead productive lives.

**A National Call to Action**

The **M>PWR Initiative** was developed by the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation in response to the national call to action issued by **Senator Tom Harkin** (D-IA), Senate author of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act and Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP), and **Delaware Governor Jack Markell**, who made expanding employment for Americans with disabilities the defining initiative of his National Governors Association chairmanship in 2012-2013.

In 2012, Senator Harkin held a series of bipartisan HELP Committee hearings to explore the persistently low employment rate of people with disabilities, followed by a round table discussion with members of the Disability Funders Network, including the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation. Following these meetings, Senator Harkin released *Unfinished Business: Making the Employment of People with Disabilities a National Priority* detailing policy recommendations to help increase labor force participation for people with disabilities.

In 2012-2013, Governor Markell held a series of focus group discussions with governors and employers around the U.S. culminating in *Building a More Inclusive Workforce: A National Summit to Boost Education & Employment Outcomes for Americans with Disabilities*. The Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation was proud to be among those attending and supporting this historic event. Following the Summit, the National Governor’s Association issued *A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities – Blueprint for Governors*.

**About M>PWR Chicago**

The Foundation held **M>PWR Chicago**—its inaugural summit—at Inspiration Kitchens-Garfield Park in Chicago, IL on April, 2, 2014.

Developed in partnership with and featuring two Foundation grant partners—the **Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities** and the **Special Education District of Lake County**—**M>PWR Chicago** brought together 23 employers, educators, government representatives, and community leaders, along with young people with disabilities to discuss how we can generate more opportunities for young people to get into and succeed in the work force by focusing on:

**Talent + Opportunity + Support = Jobs**
Participating People & Organizations

Aramark
Drew Nurczyk, HR Manager

CCM
Catherine Patyk, Vice President of HR

Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership
Amy Santacaterina, Director, WIA Programs

Chicago Mayor’s Office of People with Disabilities
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Chicago Public Schools
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Tilson & Diaz Solutions, Inc.
George Tilson, Jr., Ed.D., Training Consultant

White Lodging Services
Maggie Marchesky, Human Resource Manager

Guest Presenter

Inspiration Kitchens
Michael Usiak, Catering Coordinator
SUMMIT OVERVIEW

How can we generate more opportunities for young people with disabilities to get into and succeed in the workforce? How do we break down barriers to employment? How can we really improve employment outcomes?

These were the questions posed by Kevin R. Webb, senior director of the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation to the 23 employers, educators, community leaders, and youth gathered at M>PWR Chicago—the inaugural Summit of the Foundation’s national M>PWR Initiative.

The purpose of the Summit was to foster discussion about breaking down barriers to employment and identifying what issues need to be addressed so youth with disabilities are empowered and prepared to enter the workforce.

Tad Asbury, Vice President and Executive Director of the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities, shared a few thoughts on how we might measure success. Referring to an article by the Brookings Institution titled The Plummeting Labor Market Fortunes of Teens and Young Adults, Mr. Asbury spoke about the “dramatic drop in employment of teens and young adults in the last decade.” While these statistics are discouraging, Mr. Asbury stated that: “If we have the political, social and community will to make things happen, we know we can change the tide on unemployment for youth with disabilities.

“One possible solution,” suggested Mr. Asbury, “is Marriott’s Bridges from School to Work Program, but it is not the only one. Rather it is offering a spectrum of employment preparation solutions—mentoring, shadowing, middle school and high school preparation, training programs—where youth with disabilities are active and engaged in the world of work that ultimately leads to competitive employment. This is where we will find our success.”

To help set the stage for the discussion, Dr. George Tilson, Jr. of Tilson & Diaz Solutions, Inc., shared an overview of Trends to Consider in Transition (see the Highlight on page 7).

Throughout the course of the half-day event, Summit attendees engaged in table discussions and were asked to share their candid thoughts about:

- **Talent**—Develop ideas to help youth with disabilities prepare for careers.
- **Opportunities**—Identify concerns employers may have about hiring youth with disabilities, and recommend ways to help youth explore career options.
- **Support**—Suggest ways in which educators and employers can work together to support students with disabilities.
Highlight: Trends to Consider in Transition

George Tilson Jr., Ed.D, Tilson & Diaz Solutions, Inc.

George Tilson shared findings from a recent literature review he conducted with his colleague Dr. Carol Burbank emphasizing key themes in how we support youth as they prepare for and enter adulthood, particularly the workforce.

Strengths- not Deficits-based paradigm. Too often people who face various life barriers are labeled by that barrier and it follows them throughout life. This labeling can limit expectations and opportunities. Youth with disabilities want to be known as individuals with strengths, aspirations and interests. If they have needs for specific support they are just like anyone else. All of us need support at various times in our lives. Creativity, commonsense and connections are the keys to identifying and providing useful supports.

Connections at all levels. Tied in with this notion of supports is the idea that youth need to know there are responsible, caring adults in their schools and communities who can guide them, challenge them, and show an interest in them as unique individuals. For youth who may not have families equipped to provide healthy supports, having champions is particularly critical. Champions can be teachers, coaches, business people, and other community members.

Theory of “Cascading Effects”—Interplay of Abilities and Obstacles. All adults who are working with and supporting youth must recognize that success often occurs in small increments. One small step may lead to a new person or service, which in turn leads to new discoveries... and ultimately to successful, meaningful adult outcomes. Sometimes, in the short term, it appears a youth is heading towards failure. If we measure the success of a service too soon, we may conclude the service (and/or the youth) failed – when in fact, if we follow the youth over an extended period of time we would see a cascading effect, leading to a favorable outcome. By taking this longer view, youth (and the adults supporting them) may be more encouraged to “stick with it.”

Collective impact. This refers to the power we have—as neighbors, employers, elected officials, educators, and others—to work jointly toward a common vision that all youth, when given the right kinds of support and access to opportunities, can reach meaningful adult outcomes. This requires collaboration at all levels, from policy-making to programs, and from funding decisions to data sharing across systems. Spirited debate and respectful differences of opinions and viewpoints often lead to powerful new solutions and actions. This type of communication should be taking place at all levels – from the people who set policies that affect programs, to the programs and professionals directly serving the youth – to the youth themselves. We should be creating as many opportunities as possible for youth to be engaged in conversations with adults. They have many excellent ideas to contribute. Finally, leaders and advocates across various sectors can take firm yet positive positions on behalf of, and with youth, as an indicator of their “back bone support.”
STRATEGIES

Making it all add up: Talent + Opportunity + Support = Jobs

What quickly became evident in the discussion during the M>PWR Chicago Summit was that for many of the attendees, this was the first opportunity for a cross sector dialogue on the issue of youth transition.

Not surprisingly, one of the primary strategy recommendations made by the meeting attendees was:

Foster cross sector collaboration. This is critical if we are to move this issue forward and improve employment results for youth with disabilities. This means ongoing dialogue among a multitude of sectors including educators, youth, parents, employers, service providers, funders, policy makers, community leaders, advocates, and others, even neighbors. Society cannot continue putting the whole burden for student outcomes on the schools.

Another issue quickly identified by the Summit participants was that many of the organizations had rich outcome data about their employment preparation and placement efforts; however this valuable information is not coordinated or shared across sectors. A key recommendation:

Collect and/or share joint outcome data and standard criteria for evaluation between educators, service providers and employers. A key opportunity is to determine just how much mutually beneficial data we have between partnerships like the Marriott’s Bridges program and the Chicago Public Schools and how useful that could be in supporting joint efforts – particularly in identifying those youth who are at risk of “dropping off the grid” and finding ways to help them.

A number of additional strategies emerged from the group dialogues. These related to career preparation (Talent), career exploration (Opportunity), and career development (Support). The ideas are captured on the Venn diagram on the following page with detailed recommendations in the sections that follow.

As one examines the recommendations, what becomes apparent is that many of these strategies are not unique to youth with disabilities, but are things all youth need to truly succeed in the competitive workforce.

“A MANTRA OF MINE IS EXPOSURE PRECEDES INTEREST. WE NEED TO EXPOSE YOUNG PEOPLE TO POSSIBILITIES. WE NEED TO IGNITE A PARTICULAR PASSION FOR A CAREER AREA SO THEY BECOME INTERDEPENDENT — BECAUSE WE ALL NEED EACH OTHER.”

DR. GEORGE TILSON, JR.
TILSON & DIAZ SOLUTIONS
TALENT

Take the “dis” out of disability by focusing on strengths, not deficits.

Advise and support students in choosing jobs carefully.

Utilize strengths-based tools for assessing youth talents, foster self-determination, and identify job interests.

Don’t be afraid to use the “f” word—failure.

Increase ownership & empower students.

Teach self-advocacy.

Help students develop “work products” that give employers something “tangible to purchase.”

Reduce attitudinal barriers by showcasing success.

OPPORTUNITY

Provide exposure to “work early, work often” for all youth.

Help youth develop work ethic through purposeful, structured opportunity.

Create learning labs where students can practice work skills.

Bring employers, employees, and graduates into the classroom.

Create role-modeling & peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities between youth.

Develop “opportunity” fairs.

Consider service learning as a “transformational tool” to build work and life experiences.

Use job shadowing as a tryout before job placement.

Create an inclusive environment & support disclosure.

SUPPORT

Provide holistic, wraparound services.

Ensure youth have a champion.

Discover what motivates youth.

Increase relevance of school by making the correlation between academics & work; Promote academic credits for work.

Match essential functions of the job to the talents of youth applicants.

Build long-term, sustainable relationships with employers.

Take a two-pronged approach, building student’s skills & educating employers.

Continue to address concerns about costs of reasonable accommodations.

Collect Outcomes

Collect Data

Collective Impact

Cross Sector Collaboration

Share Outcomes

Collective Impact

Cross Sector Collaboration

Share Outcomes
**Talent – Career Preparation**

Young people often don’t know what they want to do for a career or what skills they have. What can their families, the schools, the business community, and the students themselves do to discover the many possibilities that are out there?

The leading career preparation recommendations suggested by M\\>PWR Chicago Summit attendees are:

**Take the "dis" out of disability by focusing on strengths, not deficits.** It’s a fact: youth with disabilities tend to experience more barriers to employment than their peers without disabilities. The real question is how do we erase some of those fears or doubts that employers may have about hiring these youth? During interviews, an employer may not be thinking about what the person can do, but rather “how can they possibly do this job?” As a society, we cannot legislate that people change their perceptions. This means we need to address employer concerns by focusing on ability and bringing concrete, alternative strategies they can use to support job interviews (such as structured tryouts) or ways to reconsider and restructure job descriptions. Everyone should remember as employers and employees that none of us brings 100% of the skills to every job. Collectively, we need to help students prepare to meet employers in a manner that highlights their positive attributes and helps employers view them as viable candidates for the workplace. Perceptions are influenced by direct interactions among people, so we should provide every opportunity for young people with disabilities to meet employers, beginning as early as elementary and middle school!

**Advise and support students in choosing jobs carefully.** These days we are expecting students as early as middle school to identify a post-secondary career path. This means we must help them explore options, early and often. The Summit participants discussed some career exploration activities such as providing students with assessments to help them identify their values, interests and abilities. Many examples were discussed, such as the student who expresses interest in becoming a doctor, but is receiving failing grades in core academic classes. Various assessment tools can be used as a way to start the important discussion with this student that in order to get on the path to becoming a doctor, she will need to take, and pass, biology and chemistry courses. Also, this student may not be aware that in the medical field there are many types of jobs other than doctors. With all students we must be positive but honest about what it will take to get various jobs. The Summit participants discussed the value of providing job shadowing experiences to help students see that, in every career field, there are many types of jobs. They also discussed ways to foster self-determination and leadership
skills in youth – by having them do projects that result in tangible evidence of their skills and talents, which they can then share with employers and others.

Utilize strengths-based tools for assessing youth talents, foster self-determination and identify job interests. Focus on students’ strengths and abilities, not their disabilities, in identifying job interests. During the Chicago Summit, educators identified a variety of tools and approaches they use to help students pinpoint their strengths and aspirations; and business representatives discussed strategies they use to recruit and hire employees.

Don’t be afraid to use the “f” word—failure. Another big issue is how we are often afraid to share with students that it is okay not be good at something or that it is okay to fail at something; the key is to try and learn from the experience. As champions, we must continually remind students that they have other talents, and support them in finding the opportunities.

Increase ownership and empower students. Actively seeking opportunities to empower students and increase their sense of ownership will increase their ability to self-advocate and learn to make decisions about their life and career. An example includes engaging students to facilitate the meetings about their own individual education plans (IEPs) to learn about planning and time management.

Teach self-advocacy. Teaching self-advocacy was a topic that emerged during the discussions. All agreed that the best way for youth to develop self-advocacy skills is by giving them ample opportunities to be in situations where they need to exercise those skills – with coaching from adult mentors. Youth participants at the Summit also talked about the importance of peer-to-peer encouragement. They gave examples where they themselves had mentored other students or convinced them to take advantage of resources and programs. This was a great example of youth leadership!

Help students develop “work products” that give employers something “tangible to purchase.” For example, if students identify writing as a strength, make sure they have writing samples for employers to review. Then, work with the student to develop specific responses during the interview, such as “here are places where I have used my writing skills.” For the employer, it’s about the business; by giving them something tangible to purchase, the focus is on what the student has to offer a potential employer. It emphasizes ABILITY rather than disability – which is a powerful way to influence an employer’s perceptions.

Reduce attitudinal barriers by showcasing success. As the old saying goes, “nothing succeeds like success.” This idea was certainly expressed by Summit participants who talked about how important it was to share success stories with others, through one-on-one interactions, meetings, presentations, reports, and via marketing materials in print or online. Displaying photographs of youth on job sites, including those with visible disabilities, was one of the ways cited to market and support the idea of how providing worksite exploration, training, and work experience for youth is a win-win for everyone involved. Hopefully this will encourage other businesses to enter into partnerships with schools.
Highlight: Bridges from School to Work

Tad Asbury, Vice President and Executive Director, Marriott Foundation

Established in 1989 by the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities, Bridges from School to Work fosters the employment of young adults with disabilities. Over the last 25 years, more than 19,000 young adults with disabilities have been served with over 13,600 placed into competitive jobs. Bridges emphasizes competitive job placement, retention and advancement for young adults primarily between the ages of 19-21. Over 3,500 employers have partnered with Bridges in nine cities across the country. Leadership and staff understand that if you find the right job for the right person, great things can happen.

The Bridges model actively involves all parties to the employment relationship. All services are guided by three fundamental principles, Bridges:

- Is employer-driven
- Focuses on abilities, not disabilities
- Matches participants with appropriate jobs and provides long term supports during transition from school to work

Why Bridges?

- High unemployment rate of youth.
- Young adults with disabilities have multiple employment barriers.
- Ease transition to the world of work.
- High school work experience has direct correlation to success later in life.
- Young adults who want to work need opportunities.
- Employers seeking skilled and committed entry-level employees can benefit from hiring young adults with disabilities.

Bridges advocates setting aside the disability—taking the “dis” off and talking about ability, flexibility, and adaptability. The program promotes not only competitive job placement, but also long-term job retention and advancement. Staff focus on ensuring that youth are not only just showing up for work, but they’re engaged, seeing growth in their wages and hours, and that they’re embracing life-long work.

To learn more about Bridges from School to Work, go to www.bridgestowork.org.

Levi – a Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities Bridges from School to Work participant – learns about resume writing. See his YouTube Bridges Story.
Some employers may be hesitant—or have concerns--about hiring young people with disabilities. What are some of these concerns, and what might help employers change their perceptions? What can youth do to show employers they deserve a chance?

The leading career preparation recommendations suggested by M> PWR Chicago Summit attendees are:

Provide exposure to work early and often for all youth regardless of ability. By providing early exposure to work, youth build their experience, skills, and self-determination. This also helps address the issue of employer concerns, both when they provide early exposure opportunities and see successes, but also when youth come equipped to work.

Help youth develop work ethic through purposeful structured opportunity. One can certainly discuss work ethic with students; but a much more powerful approach is giving them opportunities to see firsthand why developing a strong work ethic is important. Such opportunities may come in the form of job shadowing or job tryouts, as well as more intensive on-the-job training experiences. By interacting directly with co-workers, managers, and customers, students see that their work ethic impacts not only the business bottom line— but also their own success.

Create learning labs where students can practice work skills. Provide opportunities for students to develop pre-requisite skills and increase their comfort in a laboratory setting prior to going to an employer. This can help prepare students for success once they are in an internship or on-the-job training experience. Typically this training may take place at a school, but some employers have started to offer on-site “learning labs” at their companies.

Bring employers and graduates into the classroom. For younger students particularly, it is very valuable to invite employers to come into the classroom as guest speakers to talk about their companies, career paths, and specific jobs. Past graduates can also be invited in to share their stories and help relate work, post-secondary education and life experiences to the need for motivation to successfully achieve academic and other life goals.
**Create role-modeling and peer-to-peer opportunities between youth.** One educator described taking both students with and without disabilities during job readiness and placement activities to a major employer or job fair. She found naturally occurring role modeling between the groups, especially on issues such as making eye contact or talking with adults. The employer more easily identifies them simply as job seekers rather than youth with disabilities. A valuable tool for teachers is to pair students, or create teams or groups, who have varying abilities. This is another way to influence employers’ perceptions in a positive manner.

**Develop opportunity fairs in addition to job fairs.** At the earliest stages of career development, many youth simply lack a complete understanding of the range of career opportunities that exist in their communities and beyond. They have limited understanding of what companies do, and the positions within those companies. To address this issue, Summit participants discussed the value of broadening the traditional job fair format, and creating opportunity fairs. Students could then learn not only what jobs are available across fields, but the range of jobs that exist, and what it takes to get them. Making attendance open to all students emphasizes that when it comes to career development, no distinction needs to be made between students who have disabilities and those who don’t.

**Consider service learning as a “transformational tool” to build work and life experiences.** Research, such as a study by Jorge Garcia and Kevin Curtin at George Washington University, has shown that students participating in service learning demonstrate more career growth than workers who had not experienced service learning (*Improving Work Performance for Adolescents with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*). Students learn empathy and learn to see things from somebody else’s perspective, particularly that of an employer. Students who engaged in a service-learning project through the Marriott Foundation participated in a survey conducted by Carol Brown at Roosevelt University. Early results indicate that participation measurably increases self-esteem, which impacts workplace preparedness. This goes back to the concepts of social emotional learning, one validated predictor of success. The group agreed that service learning is a valuable tool in the toolbox of career preparation, along with the others mentioned previously.

**Use job shadowing as a job tryout before job placement.** One student really wanted to work with animals. The teacher used her connections at PetSmart to help her get the job. On her first day, the student discovered that she was frightened by the large dogs and resigned. The employer wasn’t upset; they appreciated that this was a young person having an important exploratory experience. By providing such experiences, PetSmart and other employers have a wonderful mechanism for “sizing up the talent” and influencing the development of future workers, whether these youth will work with their company or someone else. It was also pointed out that at the school level, students’ Transition IEPs (Individual Education Programs) should reflect the student’s activities in the community. And in an ideal world, students should receive academic credit for such experiences!
Create an inclusive environment that welcomes disclosure. Disclosure of a person’s disability continues to be a difficult decision for many people, and an area of concern for employers. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits employers from asking about a disability. At the same time, a job seeker or employee, cannot request an accommodation without disclosure. This poses a conundrum. However, the Summit participants had interesting perspectives and approaches towards disclosure. Some prepared their students by discussing the issue openly. One Human Resource Manager shared that they generally ask the applicant if there is anything they want to know about the position, or if they have any questions or concerns about the core responsibilities or essential job tasks of the position. This puts the emphasis on the job and the expectation that anyone applying for the position will be expected to perform the essential functions of the job. By working to create an inclusive workplace environment—for example informing perspective employees that there is a central fund for Workplace accommodations should any be needed—employers can help reduce concerns about disclosing.
Highlight: Inspiration Kitchens

Mike Usiak, Inspiration Kitchens

Inspiration Kitchens helps individuals gain valuable skills and experience that lead to employment in the food service industry through a 13-week training program. The program serves individuals at greatest risk and who are overcoming significant barriers to employment such as previous incarceration or homelessness. The program is not the traditional culinary program, but hands-on training for a variety of front line jobs such as line and prep cooks, servers, and dishwashers. If students want to progress further, they receive all the support that they can handle. The graduation rate for the 13-week program is about 65% and of that, 75% gain competitive jobs.

Partnerships are a key ingredient in the success of the program. Partner organizations utilize Inspiration Kitchens to recruit employees. The City of Chicago allows the program to pay the first 30 days of students salaries when placed with a new employer making it risk free to employers for the first 30 days. If a job placement doesn’t work out within a week or two weeks, participants still have that credit built so that they can seek other employment. The program incorporates flexibility for additional on the job training such as allowing for a temporary position. For example, one student found his own temporary employment at a sushi restaurant. Inspiration Kitchens considered this temporary placement as part of as his training and secured additional training at the site for him to learn additional knife and other skills.

At any one time, the program serves a maximum enrollment of 15 students with a rolling enrollment so that as students graduate, others are enrolled. This type of enrollment makes it easier on the chefs because they can rely on some of the more experienced students to mentor the less experienced. During the first two weeks, chefs focus on teaching safety and good work habits as well as reinforcing the importance of what they are doing. As students become more experienced, then they will be able to guide and help others.

Graduates are employed in programs across the City of Chicago and Cook County in restaurants, catering companies, food service such as hospitals, nursing homes, and country clubs. The program employs three chefs—an executive, sous, and chef trainer, all of which have many, many years of experience in the business. Inspiration Kitchens also promotes from within whenever possible and the current chef trainer was a program graduate.

Inspiration Corporation provides essential social services to Chicagoans hardest hit by homelessness and poverty, inspiring participants to take action to improve their own lives. In 2001, Inspiration Corporation launched Cafe Too, a restaurant skills training program. By 2005, Cafe Too had grown into a freestanding restaurant in the Uptown neighborhood, where students put what they learned into practice serving the general public. The program is expanding to a second freestanding restaurant in Garfield Park. Today, Inspiration Corporation has grown to serve 3,000 individuals a year by providing meals, supportive services, housing, employment preparation and vocational training, and free voice mail – serving as a catalyst for self-reliance.

To learn more, go to [www.inspirationkitchens.org](http://www.inspirationkitchens.org) or [www.inspirationcorp.org](http://www.inspirationcorp.org).
Support – Career development

For many different reasons, students struggle in school. Many of them don’t see the relevance. They may decide not to attend, or may show up and interrupt learning for others. What are some of the challenges these youth face? What can youth, families, schools, employers and other community members do to help these youth feel the personal importance of education in their lives?

The leading recommendations suggested by M>PWR Chicago Summit attendees to support career development strategies for students are:

Provide holistic, wraparound services. Services need to be designed that “wraparound” around all aspects of a youth—from school, home and social life, and so forth—that may affect employment. Last year (2013), the Chicago office of the Bridges program received 1,000 applicants. After recruiting—through events, mail, and personal calls—only 125 students showed up to enroll. Ensuring that students with disabilities are aware of and take advantage of opportunities is an ongoing challenge that needs to be addressed.

Ensure youth have a champion. The Summit participants discussed the importance of actively engaging parents and caregivers in the transition to adulthood of youth. Unfortunately, some of these families and caregivers have barriers themselves, and are unable or ill-equipped to be involved in a support role. The group identified a range of strategies for reaching out to families, and providing incentives, ranging from providing transportation assistance, food at meetings and events, child care, among others. Several participants gave examples where the students, because of their excitement about projects and career-focused activities, were able to motivate their parents or guardians to attend events and meetings. When faced with un-engaged parents or guardians, the Bridges program has reached out to aunts, grandparents, siblings, teachers, coaches, and pastors. It is vital that every youth have at least one reliable, caring adult who is their champion. Someone who is willing to check on them, advocate when necessary, but set high expectations for performance (with supports as needed) – and above all someone to whom these youth can turn to for advice and encouragement.

“I TAKE STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES OUT TOGETHER TO LOOK FOR JOBS...THEY LEARN FROM, EMPATHIZE WITH AND SUPPORT EACH OTHER, AND EMPLOYERS SEE THEM BOTH AS POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES”

LISA MARREN
WELLS COMMUNITY ACADEMY HIGH SCHOOL
Discover what motivates youth. Often, parents are key motivators for youth. At other times, it is not until students are about to graduate that they acquire a sense of urgency and are motivated to get employed. No one can make an individual be motivated; they can only provide opportunities for that person to see the personal value in putting the effort into an endeavor. Research has clearly demonstrated a positive correlation between a student’s work experience and their academic success. Positive work experiences contribute to students’ motivation. The group agreed that for many students who are struggling academically or receiving failing grades, once they get a part-time job their entire perspective begins to change. All of a sudden school becomes much more relevant because they see what they are capable of doing and see a connection between what they are learning – and how these concepts are applied.

Increase the relevance of school by making the correlation between academics and work -- and promote academic credits for work. One student participating in the Summit shared that she became more motivated for math when she associated it with budgeting and money. Teachers can get creative, making learning more like an entrepreneurial class to increase relevancy. One example given was inviting a cosmetologist into the classroom to talk about using math and science to mix hair colors, how they have to learn to budget what money clients pay them, and other business-related tasks. Summit participants had an animated discussion asking why policy-makers and education leaders are not pushing harder to find ways students can receive academic credits for bona fide work experiences.

Match essential functions of a job to the talents of youth applicants. A core responsibility of service providers and teachers is ensuring they have a firm grasp of any position for which they are helping a youth apply. Placing a student, or attempting to place a student, in a job where they cannot meet the essential functions of a job, is bad for business. It diminishes the service provider’s credibility (and that of their organization or school) with the employer contact. Job placement has to be a win-win situation for both the employer and job applicant. If the job placement professional is using a customized employment approach, the same holds true: they must have a full understanding of all aspects of the employer’s operations, in order to ensure an employment proposal that is solid, and reflects the very talents the student is marketing.

Build long-term, sustainable relationships with employers. All of the Summit participants agreed that schools and service agencies should aim to establish and nurture working partnerships – for the long haul. This can be accomplished in numerous ways including the use of outstanding customer service during all interactions, following through on commitments, demonstrating the features to benefits of both the programs AND the individual youth for whom work experiences and paid jobs are being sought. This was emphasized as a key strategy in landing successful job placements.
Take a two-pronged approach, focusing on developing skills with the student as well as helping to educate the employer. To help increase employment outcomes for youth with disabilities transitioning into the workforce, we need to help students develop their employment skills (both soft skills, as well as practical job skills). At the same time, we need to work with employers to share the tools, and resources they need in order to break down barriers to welcoming young people with disabilities into their workplaces. One of the best ways to reduce these barriers is for one-on-one interaction between employers and perspective employees, by setting up mentoring, shadowing, internship and on-the-job training opportunities.

Continue to address concerns about costs of providing reasonable accommodation. Within a company, human resource personnel may perceive extra costs that go into training, on-the-job support, and accommodations, while managers are more likely to be concerned from the operations standpoint – will accommodations disrupt the work process. The Summit participants discussed the need to raise the awareness of business people who make the hiring and operations decisions, so that they understand that accommodations are really “productivity enhancements.” This notion was put forth by Neil Romano, Assistant Secretary of Labor. Using this definition, we all need accommodations on the job at one time or another. A participant mentioned the comprehensive resources of the Job Accommodation Network (www.askjan.org) as a resource. For any particular support need, there are resources and strategies for helping workers do their best work, and employers to feel confident in implementing these productivity enhancements in a way that benefits both the employees and the business bottom line. One benefit discussed was the increased skill and confidence in managers, as they coach and develop entry- as well as mid-level employees and think about how people learn new skills in different ways.

A student from the Special Education District of Lake County participates in Disability Mentoring Day at Mitsubishi Electric Automation.
**Highlight: SEDOL**

**Nancy Peters, Special Education District of Lake County**

The Special Education District of Lake County (SEDOL) is a cooperative educational system working with 35 local school districts to serve students with disabilities. On any given day, students work in the community with a job coach in three, two-hour sessions serving up to 250 students.

Employer partnerships are fundamental to the work of SEDOL. Companies such as Wal-Mart, T.J. Maxx, Olive Garden, American Hotel Register, and Mitsubishi Electric Automation, Inc. actively partner with SEDOL providing work readiness experiences for students including:

- Job Shadow Experiences
- Disability Mentoring Day Hosts
- Business/Education Team (BET) Members
- Portfolio Day Mock Interviewers
- Summer Internship Sponsors
- Training Crew Host
- SEDOL Mart

Employer benefits of a SEDOL partnership include:

- Disability Awareness
- Access to Untapped Labor Force
- Productivity Generated from Training
- SEDOL Job Coach Support

In addition to such services as job shadowing and internships, students at SEDOL can also hone their job interviewing skills through the Portfolio Mock Interview program, now in its sixth year. The program hosts 12 to 13 employers at the College of Lake County to conduct 12-minute interviews for students. Employers also provide a 5-minute review for students sharing what they did well and how they can improve their interviewing skills. Vocational facilitators recruit among their students and case managers for participation in this training event.

SEDOL also provides a variety of training opportunities for students who cannot leave campus including in-school jobs, vocational discovery, copy center and SEDOL Mart. SEDOL Mart provides real work experiences, in a safe environment. It is designed from an employer perspective. The Good Food Project, part of vocational discovery at SEDOL Mart, challenges students to design a menu, select and make recipes and learn about associated costs in order to price the food. At SEDOL Mart, students learn customer service, customer satisfaction and a job well done.

To learn more about SEDOL, go to: [www.sedol.k12.il.us](http://www.sedol.k12.il.us).
How will we measure success?
One job at a time!

Evaluation of the inaugural M>PWR Summit was conducted at multiple levels; 1) verbal feedback during Summit; 2) post Summit written evaluations; 3) debrief call with planning partners, and 4) collection of concrete outcomes that resulted from Summit. Evaluation data from the four primary collection methods is summarized below.

Of the 23 attendees who participated in the Summit, a total of 13 completed the written evaluation survey. The survey asked for people completing to self-identify their role. The summary of respondent roles was: Employers (5), Students (2), Educators (2), Vocational Rehabilitation representatives (2), Funder (1), and No role identified (1).

Ratings:

Participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction in seven areas on a Likert Scale with results provided below.

- My overall reaction to the M>PWR Summit: 92% Excellent
- The content was relevant to me: 100% Excellent
- Facilitator’s expertise enhanced the session: 92% Excellent
- The pace of the event was appropriate: 85% Excellent
- The Individual Activity Summit Dialogue was useful: 100% Excellent
- The Group Activity Summit Dialogue was useful: 92% Excellent
- The format allowed me to network with other participants: 100% Excellent

Written Comments:

Participants were asked to provide written comments in additional areas. A summary of key comments is provided below.

One new concept/strategy/insight I gained from participating today is:
- The student at my table shared insight about the need for motivation and this linked to need for a champion. As an employer, it helps to remember this part of success.
- How can we continue to partner with schools?
- Opportunity fair instead of job fair
- Mutual data, how can the Chicago Public School District level take better advantage of the partnership with the Marriott Bridges program?
- *Bridges*! I would love to learn more about the Bridges from School to Work program.
- Networking!
- I gained a lot of insight on how ideas become reality.
- A perspective of teaching students to be independent.
- Education perspective on preparing the use for the workforce + their strategies.
- Motivation (self-esteem) from students is very important; Employers must be motivated to participate as well.

**The strengths of the Summit were:**

- Discussion of all roles that impact success of students in the workplace.
- Networking, awareness, candid discussion.
- Student attendance and diverse audience.
- Knowledge of presenters, goals and objectives of summit were clear.
- Great group of professionals with wonderful energy.
- I think the whole summit was very strong and impactful in all.
- The group activity that resulted in a variety of ideas suggestions.
- Open discussion & format.
- Teambuilding training sessions.
- Enjoyed hearing from youth. Good balance of people.

**Summary of M>PWR Chicago Planning Committee Debrief Call (April 21, 2014)**

The Planning Committee was asked to participate in a debrief call two weeks after the Summit to share feedback both from their perspective, as well as to share any comments from other attendees. Representatives participating in the call were: Kevin R. Webb and Tara M.P. Havlicek (MEAF), Kelly Pavich & Kenneth Upshaw (MFPD), Nancy Peters (SEDOL), George Tilson (Tilson & Diaz Solutions, Inc.), and Saundra Hathaway (Hathaway Group LLC).

**Planning Partner Feedback:**

- Consensus by planning partners that all attendees, regardless of role, felt the Summit was a worthwhile and a relevant experience.
- Cross sector participation was most often cited as critical to success of event – understanding other perspectives and how their role relates to others. Participants felt the cross sector aspect in and of itself energized people and generated concrete ideas. Further, the Summit format provided an excellent way for business representatives to talk directly to the people who prepare and support youth for careers, and learn more about potential partnerships.
- There are employers who do not perceive hiring youth or youth with disabilities as an issue; it is important to connect these employers with other business people to encourage them to become involved, and show them the “how-tos.”
There are many agencies going into schools to work with youth (with disabilities and without) who find youth ill-prepared for work. This is why replication of effective and proven models such as SEDOL and Bridges is so important. A key strategy for encouraging students to stay in school is illustrated by SEDOL, which exposes students to employers at an early age.

There was substantial interest and focus during the Summit on concrete strategies that will meet employer and student expectations.

Students who attended were engaged, and they helped set the tone for the event and discussion.

It is critical to expose youth to different career opportunities and that youth with disabilities know that their peers without disabilities are facing the same challenges.

General consensus was that it would be valuable to have parent representatives.

HR staff who participated in the Summit thought it would be beneficial for their colleagues to participate in such an event.
M>PWR Chicago: Impact

The goal of the M>PWR Summits is to ignite a synergy among participants who will then share and use what they learn in their work and in their collaboration with others—youth, employers, educators, service providers, community leaders—to keep the momentum building.

Here is a sampling of outcomes from M>PWR Chicago that have been reported to date:

Employer Follow-up Activities

- Hyatt Hotels collaboration with *Bridges*
  - Meeting between three different Hyatt hotels and HR staff.
  - Willingness to have job shadows, mock interviews, tours, etc.
- Marriott Hotels discussion with *Bridges*
  - Openness to having more job shadows, mock interviews, tours, etc. and understanding why it was so important for our youth.
  - Willingness to talk more to school staff about how to work with local youth.
- Inspiration Kitchens with *Bridges*
  - Discussed collaborating and building a partnership.
- Employer with *SEDOL*
  - Expressed interest in being an employer partner at the Summit.
  - Has since approached to help with *SEDOL’s* Portfolio Mock Interview Project.

Data Sharing

- *Bridges* program sharing data and reports with Chicago Public Schools to determine:
  - Which schools have the largest numbers of *Bridges* participants, and why?
  - What are the demographics of the students who participate in the program?
  - Which students are successful within the *Bridges* program?
- What factors appear to contribute to youth who are not successful?
- Roosevelt University study/research
  - Connecting Chicago Public Schools with Dr. Carol Brown to assist with research.

Networking connections

- *Bridges* parent
  - Will help talk about the value of the *Bridges* program with the Compass Group.
- Transcriber
  - Offered to connect a Summit participant interested in cosmetology to her daughter-in-law who works in that profession.

“I LEARNED THAT PROVIDING CAREER PREPARATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE HELPS MOTIVATE THEM AND BUILDS THEIR SELF-ESTEEM. AS EMPLOYERS WE NEED TO BE MOTIVATED TO PARTICIPATE IN THEIR DEVELOPMENT AS WELL.”

ROCCO LAFRONZA
HYATT HOTELS
Next Steps: Continuing the Conversation

The Summit is just a first step to identify partners, opportunities, and strategies on how to empower youth and improve employment outcomes.

As the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation and its grantees bring more people to this conversation around the country through the M>PWR Initiative, it is developing methods to keep the conversation going.

M>PWR Initiative Next Steps:
- Continue hosting M>PWR Summits through 2015.
- Share results from each summit.
- Publish a newsletter sent to Mitsubishi Electric employee volunteers, grantees, as well as the disability community at large promoting the M>PWR Initiative.
- Publish a report on each M>PWR Summit about best practices and lessons learned.
- Update our website on an on-going basis with success stories and lessons learned from around the country.
- Organize conference calls with grantees and others who would like to join the conversation; the first national call is targeted for the fall of 2014.
- Provide leadership support as part of the Disability Funders Network and work collaboratively with fellow funders to help scale up promising practices.

Learn about some of the successful strategies to empower youth the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation has supported over the years: www.meaf.org/success_stories

M>PWR. Join the conversation.
RESOURCES

What tools are available to employers, educators and youth themselves to help them with the transition process?

Below are some resources suggested at the Summit, and by M>PWR colleagues related to empowering youth:

Featured Career Preparation, Exploration & Development Resources

- **HEATH Resource Center**: Features resources from the Youth Transitions Collaborative.
- **What Can You Do? The Campaign for Disability Employment**: Offers a comprehensive list of employment and transition related resources for:
  - Employers
  - People with Disabilities
  - Youth with Disabilities
  - Family & Educators

Featured Government Resources

- **U.S. Department of Education – Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services**: Resources to improve outcomes for people with disabilities, such as:
  - **ADA National Network (adata.org)**: Ten regional centers providing publications, technical assistance, and training on the Americans with Disabilities Act.
  - **Disability Employment 101**
  - **National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center**
    - Youth to Work Coalition
- **U.S. Department of Labor – Office of Disability Employment Policy**: Offers numerous resources to help people with disabilities and their employers, including:
  - **Employer Assistance Resource Network (askearn.org)**: Offers resources to help employers recruit, hire and retain people with disabilities, such as the:
    - Workforce Recruitment Program
  - **Job Accommodation Network (askjan.org)**: Assists with workplace accommodation questions, including:
    - The Employers Practical Guide to Reasonable Accommodation
  - **National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability/Youth**: Helps to promote the success of youth with disabilities entering the workforce by issuing:
    - Guideposts for Success
  - **National Disability Employment Awareness Month**: Information and resources about this October Awareness Month Campaign, including:
    - Resource Toolbox and Free Posters
Featured M>PWR Projects & Publications

- **A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities**: Governor Markell’s Chairman’s Initiative at the National Governor’s Association.
  - **Blueprint of Promising Practices for Governors**
- **Autistic Self Advocacy Network**: Works to empower Autistic people.
  - **Autism Campus Inclusion Summer Leadership Academy**
- **Bridges from School to Work**: An employment program of the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities.
  - **My Bridges Stories**
- **Chicago Public Schools, Office of Diverse Learner Supports & Services**
- **City of Chicago, Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities**
- **Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation**: A funder of programs designed to empower youth with disabilities.
  - **M>PWR Success Stories**
- **Partners for Youth with Disabilities**: Offering mentoring resources, such as:
  - **Best Practices for Mentoring & Mentoring 101**
- **Project SEARCH**: A model High School Transition program for students with disabilities.
  - **High School Transitions that Work: Lessons Learned from Project SEARCH**
- **National Youth Transitions Center**: Created by The HSC Foundation, the Center serves youth and veterans with disabilities in transition, and is home to the Youth Transitions Collaborative – made up of organizations that know that “The Future Needs Everyone.”
  - **HEATH Resource Center**: Featuring a wealth of information on transition.
  - **American Association of People with Disabilities**
  - **National Council on Independent Living**
- **Special Education District of Lake County Foundation**: Supporting special education needs in Lake County, Illinois.
  - **SEDOL Success Stories**
- **US Business Leadership Network**: A national association of businesses dedicated to improving employment outcome for people with disabilities through programs like:
  - **Career Link Mentoring Program**
Empowering youth with disabilities to lead productive lives

www.meaf.org

Americorps volunteers participating in an inclusive work crew learn about environmental careers in Wasatch-Cache National Forest, Utah