



*Transcript of Conference Call Presentation*

## **Leading by Example: Local Partnership Strategies for Building Inclusive School-to-Work Systems**

*presented by*

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**Debbie Sheldon:** Hi, I'm Debbie Sheldon. I am with the National Transition Alliance at the Transition Research Institute of the University of Illinois, and welcome to our topical teleconference for the month of June.

Our topic today is *Leading By Example: Local Partnership Strategies for Building Inclusive School-to-Work Systems*. And today we have two local partnerships represented on our speaker panel, and they will be discussing with you the different structures that they have in place within their local partnerships, and how youth with disabilities are being included within their activities. Our two speakers are Suzanne Masland who is the Executive Director of the Central Vermont School-to-Work Collaborative. She is also a planning consultant and Chair of the Vermont State School-to-Work Governance Board. We also have Becky Densmore-Stoll, the Coordinator of the East Central Illinois Work Force Development Commission. She is also a member of the Illinois Education to Careers Serving All Learners Committee. I'm going to go ahead and turn it over to our first speaker, Suzanne Masland.

**Suzanne Masland:** Thank you very much. Welcome from finally sunny Vermont. The Central Vermont School-to-Work is located in the capital of Montpelier. I have been with the partnership for about three years and have a background in human

resource management. I think to lay the groundwork for understanding how Vermont has really very successfully integrated youth with disabilities in our school-to-work initiative, I'd like to talk about the state leadership in our state system because I think that's provided an excellent foundation.

Our state has been from the very beginning, very committed to inclusion, I think partly because special education personnel actually assisted with writing the original school-to-Work grant proposal. And we've had that representation in the statewide level from the very beginning. All of our planning and funding requirements from the State require that our initiative at a local level include all students, and we have to be very specific in how we actually detail that in our grant applications. Another requirement is that we need to have a person on our board that works with the disability community, and that voice is very much a part of the local governance. Another statewide point is that all professional development activities that are sponsored with school-to-work money have to relate the primary topic to the inclusion of all students. Our partnerships each year go through a program progress review. We are measured on not only our outcomes but on the method in which we integrated youth with disabilities, and

so there's always an accountability process. And I think finally, School-to-Work in Vermont has fully aligned our initiative with the school quality standards and the Vermont framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities. The State of Vermont has also been very instrumental in terms of leadership in helping local school-to-work partnerships develop core transition teams.

When I came on board three years ago, there were probably only about five or six core transitions teams in the state. Now there are, I believe, twelve to fourteen which align with our School-to-Work or Workforce Investment Board regions. The State not only recruited school-to-work coordinators to join those core transition teams, a woman at the Department of Ed in Vermont was instrumental in helping the teams to get started, really provide the technical assistance that was needed for school-to-work coordinators in understanding why it was so important that we did actually join in the core transition teams and each month do the work that was so important.

The Central Vermont School-to-Work Partnership is comprised of, I would say, between eighty and a hundred members. We have a management team with nine members, and that's our Governance Board. We have a couple of individuals at that level who have experience in employment transition, specialty work, and also special educators at the policy level.

I report to the management team, and the next flow in our organizational chart is what we call our Liaison Team. Liaisons in Central Vermont are a very professionally diverse group of people. We have fifteen. They are essentially contacts in each of our regional schools, primarily high and middle school.

As I said, the composition is very diverse. We

have employment transition specialists, a director of guidance, business teachers, alternative program educators, traditional school-to-work coordinators, guidance counselors, English teachers, a grade one teacher, and a Co-op Coordinator. So, the diversity is very effective in terms of developing and implementing our activities so that they do include youth with disabilities.

The partnership philosophy from the very beginning has been to establish the standard and to ensure that the system in our region, in terms of including youth with disabilities, is really a seamless system. And when I think about the question, "How has our partnership actually structured activities to include youth with disabilities," I think the only thing I could really say is that from the very beginning it has been a seamless system. We don't have special employment transition programs or special programs just for youth with disabilities.

All of our programs include youth with disabilities, and what our partnership does is provide the foundation, the funds, and the technical assistance to make sure that inclusion runs smoothly and that youth really do have some good learning opportunities from our programs.

It was not always easy to do that. When I think of some of the barriers that we incurred — first of all, we started out three years ago awarding what we call the mini grants, and our mini grants were designed to establish local community and school based programs that would integrate School-to-Work principles in a student's learning opportunities.

Mini grants from the very beginning were required — one of the requirements was that an applicant demonstrate how youth with disabilities would be included in that program. What we

encountered was that a lot of either educators or community organizations would say they were doing that but really didn't have a very comprehensive understanding of what that meant.

Each year, we also reviewed the progress of those mini grant projects to ensure that the program was being delivered as it was outlined in the grant application and did see some instances where clearly youth with disabilities were welcome into the program, but there really was not a mechanism to problem solve any obstacles that they might actually encounter. And so, we began a program of technical assistance, and, you know, would continue the funding if the particular organization was really true in their commitment to that.

I think our liaisons have had a very strong impact in this seamless system. Because of the diverse nature of their work and background, there has been an opportunity for them to mentor each other. For instance, when one of the high schools establishing a work-based learning program that will easily include youth with disabilities, a liaison is actually paid to mentor the school liaison that needs assistance. We would provide professional development funds for the newer practitioner that needs that help and assistance.

I think the involvement also at the core transition team level has been really instrumental. We're a real grass roots organization, and in our core transition teams we probably have half of our liaisons and myself that attend each month. I am just as involved with their projects as anyone else who's on the team, and we've been able to use some of the tools from School-to-Work on the core transition team.

In our funding applications we've used a variety of different matrices. As an example, we translated

one matrix to the core transition team. The matrix we developed was a transition services matrix and a resource guide that helps employment transition specialists or case managers in schools to actually track a student's needs, where the services are available, and what are their requirements. We use that matrix at three different levels to track not only individual students but total school count and then an overall regional count so that we could bring those figures to the legislature when we were requesting funding for a particular project.

Just a couple more examples of some regional projects I think that have really highlighted our commitment in inclusion with youth with disabilities is another community collaboration project with the Department of Employment and Training, and that is to bring together a multitude of community partners in our Summer Youth Employment Program.

The first thing that we did was we align the program competencies with the Vermont standards so that our students will receive a half a credit for the program. There is also a year long mentoring component. Some of the community partners are Vocational Rehab, our local mental health agency, the Jobs program, the University of Vermont, School to Work, and all of the employment transition specialists in our schools and many of our STW liaisons.

This particular program was recognized by the Department of Labor as a best practice and is being replicated around the state of Vermont. In that context there was a lot of support and collaboration in making sure that the needs of youth with disabilities was really met. There was a lot of continuous improvement in our monthly meetings in terms of, you know, how to really build that into the

program even more.

I think there is actually two more tools that I'd like to talk about, and I think that I have probably about five minutes here. We, about two years ago, compiled all of our best practices into a resource guide that was fully aligned with the Vermont standards. That particular resource guide has several examples of programs that do integrate youth with disabilities and has a whole chapter on employment transition, and resources, contacts, general guiding principles. We have several examples of different regional best practices. We highlight students and their achievement in the resource guide. And then finally, in our region in the last year, we've been working very hard to establish a central database in all of our regional high schools. It began in one of our larger high schools, Montpelier, and it was designed to track student needs and interests and then to match those needs and interests with employers who have a track record of being able to actually support that student whatever their need or particular interest and learning opportunity.

Our database right now is on the State Department of Employment and Training website at <http://www.det.state.vt.us> and it will remain there. Vermont is technically sunsetting our School to Work organizations at the end of December. However, the database will be installed in all of the regional high schools, will be maintained by the Department of Employment and Training, and there will be a training program this fall that will actually train anyone in the school who has an interest in effectively using the tool. And I think that's sort of one of our closing gifts in terms of the region.

Just one last thought that I'd like to share, sort of on a personal note as a regional coordinator. I

had worked in human resource management, came to the School-to-Work partnership, I think about two weeks before our grant application was due that particular year. And when I was completing the funding templates and got to the section that said, must include ALL students, I really didn't understand what ALL students meant. I mean, I understood it, I guess, on a very entry level, but not fully.

At that time as I was struggling with writing my grant application, I was living with another single mom who had a daughter with Downs Syndrome. I took a break from grant writing and went into the kitchen and overheard her talking to her daughter's case manager at school about some current problems that she was having at school.

And this woman actually worked only four days a week so that she could devote her fifth day of the week, her working day as she called it, to go to her daughter's school and to really — to guide the team that was educating her daughter. And as she told me about her experiences in the school, she said something that was very, very helpful for me in terms of understanding what ALL students meant.

And what she said was, "I just want doors to open for Lisa that open to all the other students." And I went back out to my grant application, and I think very easily began to envision what that would look like because I was fortunate enough to have a very tangible example right before me.

I think that's pretty much what I have and would turn it over to Becky, I guess.

**Becky Densmore-Stoll:** Thank you. This is Becky Densmore-Stoll, and I am the coordinator of a regional partnership located in East Central Illinois. To give you a background of my employment history, I actually worked in the private sector as a customer service manager for roughly nine and

a half years. Decided that I did not want to be a customer service manager the rest of my life, so I went after my Master's Degree in the background of organizational development.

Consequently, our partnership was advertising and I applied; didn't really know what it was all about, this School to Work thing. I was selected for the position, and I took it. In Illinois we call School-to-Work, Education-to-Careers. Our partnership structures are such that there are thirty-nine local partnerships in the state; we are one of thirty-nine. The partnerships are structured around community college districts.

Our vision for the commission is to develop a highly skilled, well-educated, and globally competitive work force. That pretty well drives what I do, and that does not mean just people who are able bodied. That means people with disabilities also, because they have something valuable to contribute to our society.

I actually have a board of directors. The partnership structure is a board of directors of twenty-five with fifty-one (51%) percent being private sector. From there, I have seven work teams. In addition to that, I have something called an ETC, Education to Careers, district coordinator. I've put them in place in every one of my school districts. I have thirty-one school districts.

Now, as I was talking to service providers in my community, there were two emerging themes and I'm talking about service providers with people with special needs. The two emerging themes were there was a lot of frustration and there seemed to be a lack of a communication network. The frustration these service providers were feeling was due in part largely to the demands of their day-to-day career responsibilities and their feelings of not being able

to let their customers know about all of the comprehensive services that we have in our communities.

The communication issue was also a significant barrier. Through my conversations with professionals, I began to see that information on professional development opportunities or community meetings and opportunities for student development were simply not filtering down in a consistent fashion to classroom teachers and special needs providers.

Another barrier that I have to admit that was a part of serving all learners was my knowledge level. I came from the private sector; and I didn't really know about this culture of education! Didn't really understand the needs that are required with people with special needs. So, I had a lot of learning that I needed to get up to speed on and very quickly.

The State developed something called a Serving All Learners Subcommittee. Now, our funding for the State of Illinois began in 1998. In July of 1998, the funding started rolling down to the partnership levels. I came on board about two weeks prior to that in June of '98. Our federal sunset is scheduled in June of 2002, so we've been at this for about two years.

One of the things that the state did was quickly put into place a Serving All Learners Subcommittee because a consistent message was being heard from coordinators across the state: "What do you mean by 'All'?" And the response from our technical assistance providers was: "All means All". And as Suzanne alluded to, she didn't really understand that conceptual 'all means all'. I mean, what is that? I didn't have that conceptual framework either, did not understand, that we were talking about people with special needs and how then to include these learners.

So, what I did is I pulled together something called a special needs taskforce. The participants on this, I drew upon parents or people with special needs, students. We have something here locally called a Developmental Service Center, Cunningham's Children's Home, which is a private home with kids who have special needs, a private facility publicly funded.

I drew upon post-secondary education, special populations coordinators, our Office of Rehabilitation Services. They have something here locally; it's through the park district called Champaign-Urbana Special Recreations Department. I called upon them, Chambers of Commerce representatives, the regional Office of Education Center for Independent Living, school district reps, special education cooperatives, and so on. So you can get the picture this was a pretty large group. We wound up with around thirty different people on this taskforce.

The way we began this was to ask the question, "What is your greatest challenge in meeting the needs of your clients, customers, or students?" And everybody had an opportunity to vent what was their greatest challenge. We went around the room in our first session, and all of a sudden there were reoccurring themes.

From there we took all of these challenges and we started brainstorming potential strategies to address these needs. Then we sub-grouped those, and we come up with communication, family social skills and values, transitioning, and career development as issues. So, we have four sub-groups. We met over a period of ten months, and from there we then came up with a lot of different initiatives that we currently have in place.

Some of the examples that were designed in this process were to recreate a transitional planning

committee's community resource book and develop a marketing plan to get that into parents' hands. Currently it was only being disseminated in to some classrooms.

We are also looking at designing an employee handbook for hiring people with disabilities. We had one in place, and we looked at this and said, okay, from an employer perspective this may be somewhat overwhelming because it was written from an educational perspective, so that people would look at this and say, "So if a person has Downs Syndrome, these are some of the things they may not be able to do." So, what we are doing is focusing on ability and not disability.

In addition to that, we identified that some common language needed to take place. That common language being something as simple as in our community we call people job developers who work with people who have disabilities and they go out and find them jobs. So, what we took a look at the fact that an employer is not going to know what a job developer is. However, they do know what a recruiter is. So, we are listing those 'recruiters' in our handbook so that it's right at the fingertips of our employers.

We also are looking at hosting a good morning chamber breakfast to reach the private sector. We are looking at bringing in a nationally known speaker to speak about hiring people with disabilities and the positive impact it's had on that corporation's bottom line.

The other things — some other simple things that we've done that we just didn't really even think about was that we are primarily an English-speaking community. However, we have a Spanish population that has grown over the last ten years at the rate of two hundred (200%) percent. So, it was a

matter for job fairs making sure that we had Spanish posters available so that people could read those and interpret them. In addition to that, we use balloons to color code jobs that are available. We are also looking at developing a building trades expo, which we're entitling Trade Up.

We're modifying our application forms so that we ask educators specifically need so that we can include learners who may have disabilities. And we've looked at all of our applications to things that we host; do we have that line on there?

In addition to that, we even hired interpreters. We have hearing impaired. We've hired interpreters so that people can come to our job fairs. We do not create any special function that is geared just to people with special needs. Everything that we create is geared to be inclusive of all.

We also have put our ETC district coordinators, not only in the school districts, but now we have representation from organizations such as the Office of Rehabilitative Service as well as at our Rural Special Education Cooperative. Any place where there may be an agency that is helping people with disabilities, we are making sure that information from our offices, that may be a professional development opportunity where we're paying for — offering scholarships or paying for substitute teacher fees for registration, that they too can take part of that as well as our mini grants. We make sure that they get copies of the mini grants. That's pretty well what we do in our partnership.

The Serving All Learners Subcommittee has been a valuable tool for me. They have done a couple of things that have been very important. The first thing that they did is they created a survey to ask coordinators what kind of technical assistance do you need to meet youth with disabilities and to

make sure you're being inclusive. So, that helps raise awareness.

Another thing that we did was a self assessment; created a self-assessment tool that went out into the thirty-nine partnerships and asked the partnerships to rate themselves; how are you doing in meeting the needs of all learners and then defined all for them.

We've also created a brochure that is for Serving All Learners, and these brochures have been distributed throughout the state. In my partnerships, these are found at the Don Moyer Boys and Girls Club, at the Urban League, at Chambers of Commerce. They are also in our special education cooperatives. They have copies of these also. We have given these out to PTA members as well, which has been another important contact for us.

The network that we created with the special needs taskforce, was disbanded. I promised them at the start that we would only go for nine months. We actually went ten months. Now those people are integrated into the different work teams — the seven teams that are standing for the commission so that when we design anything, we have the right voices at the table.

As far as our commitment in our partnership, there is a commitment. Service providers through this network have seen that commitment demonstrated over and over. We have a message of whatever it takes. They feel comfortable to give us a call and say this is what we need. When we plan and design anything, we make sure that we are inclusive, and that is a commitment that's not going to go away after the funding sunset.

We have motivated Chambers of Commerce to start looking at this pool of untapped resources. In our partnership we have less than three (3%)

percent unemployment rate. With that less than three percent, we're scrambling for workers. Our private sector is primed at this point to begin opening the door for people with disabilities and then start looking — borrow the theme from the national meeting — national month — you know, start looking at the ability that they can count on.

And I think that I am pretty well close to my fifteen minutes so —

**Debbie Sheldon:** Thank you very much, Becky. This is Debbie again, and at this point what I'd like to do is open it up to questions and answers, and you can direct your question to either Suzanne or Becky or both of them. And we'd like to hear who you are and where you're calling from when you pose your question.

It's always hard on a teleconference because you don't know if you're going to interrupt someone else. And I guess I wanted to ask — I'll go ahead and ask Suzanne something.

And getting back to your liaisons that you feel have been so important for so many different reasons in your partnership, and you talked about kind of mentoring and professional development opportunities for new liaisons that might not have as much experience. I wondered if you could maybe share a couple of examples of how that mentoring is structured or what type of professional development those newer liaisons get related to youth with disabilities?

**Suzanne Masland:** Sure. First, just to broaden on the definition of a liaison a little bit more and to identify their role, what I did when I came into the partnership was to recruit a liaison or a contact person in each of our schools. I was specifically looking for individuals that had a diverse background in terms of looking at the whole mix.

Liaisons are paid a very, very small stipend. Their commitment to the School to Work initiative, I think, comes from different backgrounds. There is a large majority of commitment from the employment transition specialists who have had some background and with supported employment for a long period of time.

What we had the first year, I think, was between eighteen and twenty liaisons; again a very diverse professional mixture. They began meeting once a month, and at the first part of every meeting brainstorm obstacles. I think this essentially gave them an opportunity to just vent about their frustrations in trying to integrate School to Work activities in their individual schools.

In that discussion there were several examples of a work based learning programs. It's supposedly open to all students, and yet all students cannot participate in it because it doesn't have the support mechanism there. So, one example of a high school in the central Vermont region who was in that position, I basically hooked her up with two or three of our more experienced liaisons in supported employment who had already developed exemplary programs in our region.

They were paid over the summer. We had a very small what we call technical assistance provider pool. I think they were paid a hundred or a hundred twenty dollars a day as a stipend, and what they would do is meet with that particular liaison who needed some technical assistance. They would meet as a team and would work with her to look at what were the gaps in her school, what would they suggest in terms of additional resources.

Often times the liaison who was needing some guidance would need further education and training. Our collaborative would support that finan-

cially, and at some point I would check back in to see what the progression was. Often times when you had those mentoring relationships, the liaison who needed the help would come back to the partnership a short time later with a funding request that would actually begin to make changes in their individual school.

I don't know if that answered your question.

And there are fourteen regional partnerships in Vermont.

**Keith:** This is Keith with Cascascia Area Partnership in Illinois, and you had mentioned your database with the Department of Employment and Training. Are we able to access that through a website?

**Suzanne Masland:** At this time you are not, because there are security codes. It's still in the first level of implementation. The database was actually first developed and the program accessed and used at one high school, and when we decided it needed to be Internet accessible, the Department of Employment and Training offered to put it on their website and to actually design it. What they have done is created the design to accommodate all of the schools in Vermont at some point.

**Keith:** Okay. Thank you.

**Suzanne Masland:** Just a further note; later on this summer I'm hoping to put a sample of one or two of the placement tables on our Vermont School to Work website at [www.state.vt.us.stw](http://www.state.vt.us.stw).

**Keith:** Thank you.

**Blake Bradley:** My name is Blake Bradley. I'm with Beaumont State Center in Beaumont, Texas, and I had a question for you. Could you go into more detail about your employment resource guide and what info is included in your handbook?

**Becky Densmore-Stoll:** Sure, I will. Right now

we're in the developmental stage, but what we've done is to structure the book as two things: one, it's an informational guide; two, it's a marketing piece. It will identify potential strategies for employers to assist them in overcoming a potential issue an employee might be having. So, maybe it is a learning guide, if you will.

If a person is having difficulty understanding instructions, are you rattling off five things in a row? If you are, can you do one thing at a time? So there's specific training strategies in there.

Another section of the book is also going to have, as I said, a list of recruiters. Those recruiters are actually job developers for local organizations. It will have the organization's name and the contact person along with their phone number so that employers, when they are looking for help, all they've got to do is flip over to the back side and it's at their fingertips — employees are at their fingertips.

The other thing is to give an overview of the fact that they're going to be getting two for one in most cases, so they're not going to have to be worried about that particular issue as far as the training is concerned. There will be a person there often times assisting that employee to learn the job. That's another part of the book.

So, as I said, it's still under development. We're looking at having this done by the first of September.

**Blake Bradley:** Great. That sounds fantastic. Could you tell us how we would obtain a copy of that when it's done?

**Becky Densmore-Stoll:** I would be more than happy to give you my contact information. I can give you my e-mail. If you just send me an e-mail with your contact information, I'll be happy to

provide you with a copy. My e-mail is [densmore@rantoulchamber.com](mailto:densmore@rantoulchamber.com).

**Blake Bradley:** Right. Thank you. I appreciate your answers.

**Becky Densmore-Stoll:** You're welcome.

**Debbie Sheldon:** This is Debbie again, and I actually wanted to just make another point about that resource guide that Becky is working on because I've seen the older version and what she's been doing. And I think one of the nice pieces that she is doing with it, is that she is taking out any definition of different disabilities and characteristics of different disabilities so that won't be in there. Really it is kind of a problem-solving tool for employers in terms of thinking about reasonable accommodations. It's something that employers in this community seem to be looking for.

**Becky Densmore-Stoll:** I think along those lines, this is another important missing piece in our education world now, and that is our educators do not know how to talk to potential employers. That was another thing that was identified through the special needs taskforce. And so, one of the things that we're doing is we're hosting some professional development opportunities to train our educators in talking and communicating with employers. So, that was another piece of this whole — our handbook.

**Janis Chadsey:** Janis Chadsey with the National Transition Alliance, so this is a question, I guess for both Becky and Suzanne. I was wondering what you have found to be an effective strategy when you've encountered people who are just really resistant to the idea of including all youth, not necessarily from a lack of knowledge standpoint, but maybe from people who have attitudes about them.

**Suzanne Masland:** This is Suzanne. I'll take a quick shot at that. Something that comes to mind is a group that had applied for a mini grant in our community. This was not a school-based group; it was a community-based group who did have that attitude, and that actually came through in their grant application. We had several members on our grants committee who work with youth with disabilities. They picked up on it, and I think in the first round we denied the application and gave the reason, which was essentially that we felt that they would not be able to support youth with disabilities.

And they did apply for subsequent funding, and with some technical assistance, I think we were able to change their perspective; and that technical assistance involved having a couple of the liaisons meet with them and really talk about why it was important. It was some of our requirements and I think it did shift their perspective because essentially they wanted the money and they maybe had somewhat of a changed perspective.

**Becky Densmore-Stoll:** This is Becky. I'll take a little stab at that. While I have never had outright resistance, I have had hesitations. And I think that maybe it was not really PC to be outright belligerent about it. I have had hesitancy, and what I do is I focus on the positive. I also try to reinforce with a peer, get one of their peers to also talk to them.

Normally though when I'm talking to people, I have such passion. On a personal note, I have a brother who is mentally disabled, and he's nearly fifty years old. And growing up, which has been my entire lifetime, watching him and watching people look at him and stuff, I have — there's a passion there, an inherent passion.

And I have a passion for people with disabili-

ties, so I'm an advocate. And people get excited, quite honestly, when they are around me because there are so many positive things to contribute and to focus on. I really don't talk about what people can't do. I talk about what they can do and how they can positively impact a program or a business.

**Debbie Sheldon:** Questions for Becky or Suzanne.

**Blake Bradley:** I think they're doing a great job.

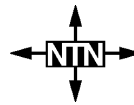
**Becky Densmore-Stoll:** Thank you.

**Debbie Sheldon:** Okay. Well, if there are no other questions, then we will go ahead and close this. I'd like to thank both Becky and Suzanne for their time today and also their time for preparing for today and for all of their hard work and their dedication towards inclusive School to Work.

And I want to thank everyone who joined us on a Friday afternoon. It's a lovely one here in Illinois, so thank you for giving us your time and have a nice weekend.

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