Listen to Us: Responses from Youth with Disabilities During the Youth Voices Community Forum

Authored by:

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Introduction

Youth with disabilities face barriers to success that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic of racism that has generated protests in support of Black Lives Matter. The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) reached out to a group of youth and young adults with disabilities to share with us their most pressing concerns and to share their advice to service providers and other adults about how to support them.

Young people told us that the major barriers they are facing during the pandemic are

- accessing technology,
- participating in school,
- access to jobs,
- dealing with mental health concerns,
- access to basic needs for their families, and
- obtaining health care.

With these barriers in mind, IEL designed a community forum that put youth voices at the center of the conversation. Youth with disabilities including youth of color led the conversation about the current pandemic and how it is affecting them, their families, and their communities. On May 28, 2020, we invited more than 200 participants to join in-depth discussions about the main topics identified by youth to discuss the strategies, effective practices, and resources.

Many more people wanted to participate in this session, so IEL has captured the major themes from the Youth Voices Community Forum. We are pleased to share this report with the field to better understand what youth with disabilities are facing and how best to support them. Several of the youth co-authored this report, providing quality reviews of the summaries and offering clarification of ideas.

This report includes notes from the general session, each breakout session, and a list of resources shared by topic area among participants. Links to resources are provided as a convenience and for informational purposes only; they do not constitute an endorsement or an approval by IEL. We hope you find this information useful. Please contact us at IEL to learn more about how you can partner with youth with disabilities.

The Youth Panelists

C'alra Bradley. Ms. Bradley is 22 years old, lives in Texas, is a participant in the Right Turn program, and is passionate about helping other young adults

Erika DeLong. Ms. DeLong is 22 years old, lives in Michigan, is a current participant of the Right Turn program (formerly a RAMP participant), and is a college student studying criminal justice

Jason Hagins. Mr. Hagins is 16 years old, lives in Georgia, is a participant in the RAMP Program, and plans to join the Air Force after graduation

Hovis Lovett. Mr. Lovett is 17 years old, lives in Georgia, is a participant in the RAMP program, and plans to enter the Coast Guard after graduation

Fernando Olivarez. Mr. Olivarez is 24 years old, lives in California, is an alumni of the NCWD/Youth's Youth Action Council on Transition (YouthACT) and served as a YouthACT Ambassador, and works at a Center for Independent Living as an independent living specialist

James Saunders, Mr. Saunders is 15 years old, lives in Georgia, is a participant in the RAMP Program, and plans to attend Ogeechee Technical College to study Fish & Wildlife Management after graduation.

Starting the Conversation: A facilitated discussion

"Dealing with different things like racism and police brutality. It's just so much."

How have you personally been impacted by the pandemic, and how do you feel that your community has been impacted by the pandemic?

- It is harder to learn from home. It helps to have computers from the school, but others in the community do not have internet access. Students share internet access with others who do not have it.
- Unable to work due to the pandemic.
- Staying in the house affects mental health and can cause depression.
- People are on the phone more often than usual, wanting to talk and share their experiences.
- As a member of the cancer-survivor community, I find we are using Zoom a lot to avoid being in person because we are at higher risk.
- Cannot hang out with friends in person, on the phone more talking about the pandemic and helping each other with schoolwork.
- Hard to communicate with everyone, going through different emotions about the racism and police brutality.
- Some adults like teachers or grandparents are easier to talk with than parents or friends.
- After losing a job and switching to school from home, there is no set schedule, which makes it hard to focus, and easy to feel down.
- Schooling at home is distracting
- It has been harder to find employment with the pandemic going on. As a person with a disability, it can be harder to interview over the phone or video.
- Despite the need for more workers in necessary jobs like grocery stores, it is still hard for a young person with a disability. Employers are still judging applicants negatively for having a disability.

As a person with a disability what strategy or what tools have you used during the pandemic to obtain or keep your services to complete or access school, to look for jobs and to get involved in the community?

- **School:**
    - In some cases, teachers have shared information before school ended, and schools have provided laptops for doing schoolwork at home.

- o Using personal resources to pay for a tutor to keep from falling behind
- o Some schools are providing help to find tutors, share PowerPoints, and laptops.
- o Some teachers are checking on students to make sure they are doing well and getting work done on time.
- **Employment**:
  - o Accessing **Right Turn** program services has helped with finding job leads, job applications, and job searches—even if it means finding a job after things open back up.
  - o Job search strategies have included connecting with an employment specialist and the vocational rehabilitation program to put together a resume, create a cover letter, and putting together a business plan to start up a new business or social enterprise.
    - ▪ JAN (the Job Accommodation Network) offers resources to find accommodations.
- **Mental health care:**
  - o Exercise and going outside to interact with nature, which are really good for mental health
  - o Getting and staying connected with people through virtual meetups and other peer supports
  - o Setting up and/or joining game day, youth day, and other virtual events

What do you think needs to change, whether that is the job market, access to resources, or the education system?

- Need to have more access and accommodations for people with disabilities, e.g., provide accommodations for people to work from home in order to do their job.
- Provide options to interview in-person for people with disabilities who cannot perform as well by phone or video.
- Provide food and necessary (essential) supplies to the community as well as masks, gloves, and hand sanitizers. Not everyone can afford them or access them, and in some cases these items are unavailable because people are hoarding them.

What can adults do to help young people during the pandemic?

- Young people are the future. Adults/employers should hire more young people with disabilities
- Provide assistance including housing, rental assistance, food, and household items as they struggle during the pandemic with lost jobs and ongoing costs.
- Provide income supports and transportation supports.
- Do not treat young people with disabilities as though they are separate or not capable of doing anything on their own.
- Reach out to young people—do not assume that they know how to or have the courage to ask for help. For example, most young people do not know about unemployment or how to apply for that.

- Listen to young people with disabilities—they want to be heard.
- Understand each young person's communication style or preference, such as auditory or visual or hands-on. Do not treat all youth the same, each person requires supports in a different way.
- Know that youth from certain communities are going through challenges that are different from their peers around the country. Low-income communities are impacted the most by the pandemic and the ongoing racial justice issues. Talk with them to understand what they are dealing with and consider what you can do financially to assist the person or the community.

Topic Focus: Technology Access & the Digital Divide

"Just level the playing field for everyone to ... have opportunities."

What are challenges to serving youth or obtaining services for youth with disabilities during COVID-19?

- Lack of laptops
- Poor internet service makes it hard to conduct Zoom calls with clients, and clients want to engage virtually
- Even when youth receive school-issued devices, they do not have access to the internet
- Some students are anxious about connecting by video
- Many high school seniors use laptops provided by the school or district and must return them when the school year ends. How will they attend online community college if they do not own a laptop of their own?
- In some areas, even the internet is very limited, and communication is limited to telephone and mail
- Access to educational content is not equal. Different schools and teachers use different tools. Some schools do not allow teachers to speak directly or teach directly things have to be recorded.
- Privacy is an issue for providers—how do we follow the privacy rules and guidelines?
- Some youth with disabilities have challenges with organization and may lack family support to engage with online chats and emails. Some youth and parents do not have the ability to use technology.
- Today there remain places in US that do not have running water and electricity, including on Indian reservations and very rural areas. Schools and libraries are resources for many students with disabilities and their families in areas that are under-resourced, and with those buildings closed, access is gone for technology, basic safety, and food as well. Technology is not something they can afford.

- Schools are struggling with finances and with people out of work, it becomes a matter of less money and resources
- Youth who are deaf-blind

What are opportunities to provide services?

- Low-tech solutions include sending assignments or activities home in paper-based packets, then following up by phone
- Some schools are providing devices for all students.
- In one example, the school parks buses with routers in them in different neighborhoods throughout the day for students to connect to the internet.
- County offices of education are exploring the policy side of bringing broadband into counties, but there are huge costs and physical limitations. These policy solutions will not happen fast enough to address student needs right now, but it is something we all should be working towards for future generations.
- Some providers are asking for proof of student enrollment and it is then highly discounted during school seasons
- Some districts are partnering with businesses/corporations like Apple, Microsoft, Google to support tech needs of students.
- Education policy should provide internet and resources similar to free lunch for students who need them
- Provide professional development to ensure teachers are future ready
- Add to Title I funds for accessible technology and broadband
- If we had broadband as a utility and integrated tech learning in high schools, our world of work would change and allow for more remote jobs

Resources shared by participants included:

- Schoolology for creating a course/group
- Google classroom
- Zoom
- Google voice
- NTACT has lots of free resources (www.Explore-Work.com)
- I Can Connect program in each state provides equipment for people who are deaf blind to use telecommunications

Topic Focus: Changes in Education and Virtual Access

> **"The transition to online learning has been hard but the teachers make it easier."**

What are our challenges/barriers to meeting the needs of youth/young adults with disabilities during this pandemic for this topic?

- It was a hard transition
- Teacher post assignments and videos of how to do the assignments which has made the transition easier
- It is important to have teachers who support you during the transition
- Some students have no laptop or internet
- Some students are not able to learn virtually as well because their learning style is more hands on
- Some schools give students Chromebooks to do their schoolwork, however now that school is ending students give the computers back. Pre-employment service programs will now have trouble reaching students during the summer.
- Online platforms that vision impaired youth cannot access.
- Schools giving out education packets that are not accessible for vision impaired students
- Students with significant disabilities needs parental support to access technology, however some parents work and are not able to help the students
- Family engagement is more challenging now
- Not able to meet in person with youth
- Some students may be failing because of lack of teacher support

What are strategies and resources we have been using to support of youth/young adults with disabilities during this pandemic?

- Teachers contact students from several different platforms
- Outside programs such as RAMP[1] help support the youth
- Organize group Zoom meetings
- Talk to students and find out their interests to engage them
- Bringing in employers to speak about their jobs
- Engage youth through games
- Encourage students to join Movers and Makers of Tomorrow Virtual Summer Summit in Indiana

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[1] "RAMP is...a safe zone for sharing concerns related to school and community where we can get real solutions to our problems." ~James Saunders, Georgia

- Call students and offer additional assistance
- Sending resources by email

Let us imagine a future after the pandemic that is more equitable…What would it look like and what would be needed to make that possible for this topic?

- Learn about each other's problems and help each other
- Teach students how to advocate for themselves
- Help students understand their own disability and show them how to ask for accommodations
- In elementary schools put students together so they can learn about each other
- Keep remote learning options even after the pandemic (while ensuring they are fully accessible). It would work well for young people with chronic health conditions, frequent school absences due to mental/physical health
- Supply students with basic necessities such as toilet paper and food.
- Public transportation especially in rural areas.

Topic Focus: Finding and Keeping a Job During the Pandemic

"A challenge for me is being laid off work and not knowing when I will be able to go back to work. I worked 2 jobs before the pandemic and since their both waitressing jobs they have closed. There [haven't] been many job opportunities in Michigan either so it's been a struggle trying to find a new job."

What are common barriers to finding and keeping a job for youth with disabilities during COVID-19?

- School staff are not available to coordinate meetings with students
- There are a limited number of jobs available
- Lay-offs are occurring and there is uncertainty about when businesses will reopen
- Some people are afraid to leave the home due to coronavirus
- Youth serving organizations are struggling to implement summer youth employment programs
- Young people have difficulties with filing for unemployment
- Youth with disabilities are being furloughed
- Greater challenges for employers to offer jobs to youth with disabilities due to their concerns about the disability

- Youth with disabilities need access to appropriate jobs (suitable to their needs and interests) that have accommodations
- Lack of access to technology and supports to use that technology to connect to potential jobs and others
- Many of the youth must take public transportation to their work, which is now either very limited or unsafe.
- Some Youth with disabilities benefit from regular check-ins to support them while working, but virtual check-ins have been a challenge in assisting with work related issues
- Youth are losing jobs or no longer able to access subsidized summer employment opportunities due to decreased program capacity during the pandemic. Even for existing job opportunities, youth safety is a big concern.

Other considerations:

- Youth with disabilities may not understand that a layoff or furlough is about the pandemic, not a reflection on them or their abilities; understanding the wide scale impact of the pandemic is a challenge for some youth
- Youth are challenged with thinking about "the future" when they do not know what the future looks like or how long the pandemic will go on
- Developing and maintaining a multi-year course of study is a challenge when people are operating on a day-to-day basis.
- Many young people with disabilities are being left out of the transition to online learning and also the job market, both exacerbated by the pandemic.
- Concerns about mental health and depression among youth who are not working or able to find a job
- Some youth do not have reliable transportation, so using online platforms has been helpful. On the flip side, many youth need an in-person resource.

What are some strategies and resources to support youth with disabilities in obtaining or keeping a job despite the pandemic?

- Offer Student Work Readiness Training and Student Self-Advocacy Training that will help young people with disabilities after the economy reopens and to be ready for work
- Using technology like Zoom, FaceTime, or Google Hangouts to set up virtual informational sessions and interviews between student and employers
- Provide alumni "lunches" to keep young people socially engaged
- At the postsecondary level, creating online internships and employment opportunities for the fall, and meeting with other departments about developing jobs and reach out to the community to look for employment opportunities
- Curating examples of virtual internships and work experience platforms (see Resource below)

- Creating and conducting virtual job shadowing (see Resources below) and virtual employment site tours
- Set up Google Classroom with young people
- Create virtual job clubs
- Social media is a great resource, e.g., Facebook Live videos and Facebook groups, where youth can chime in and access resources that may be helpful

What will the future look like post-pandemic for jobs for youth with disabilities?

- Customizing employment at home is going to be more common. This may include informational interviews with different employers and asking about tasks that can be done from home.
- Increased accessibility on virtual platforms, e.g., Microsoft Teams will be adding captioning to their web chat services
- Increased use of social media as a resource to engage youth
- Employers will need additional supports as they transition positions to virtual, programs need to consider how to support that

Resources shared by the participants included:

- Virtual Job Shadow: https://www.virtualjobshadow.com
- Google PowerPoint offers real-time captioning; Microsoft Teams will add captioning to their web chat services soon
- Pre-employment training and services (Pre-ETS) are provided online at WINTAC (http://www.wintac.org/content/resources-distance-service-delivery#remote)
- NYEC is collecting examples of different virtual internships/work experience platforms (Virtual Job Shadow is one) - which hopefully will mitigate employers' concerns about supervision, confidential sharing of docs, etc. Some of these include: Hats and Ladders, LRNG, Virtual Job Shadow, and CareerEdge, Naviance, LinkedIn Learning, and Symba - all different comprehensive virtual work experience platforms
- For job exploration and shadowing: https://www.drkit.org/career-videos
- Explore-Work (https://explore-work.com)
- Pathways to the Future (http://www.pathwayswv.org/docs/Pathways%20Pre-ETS%20Sample%20Lessons%20-%202019%20FINAL.pdf)
- Global Learn Free (https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en)
- CEC's Division on Career Development and Transition, Live Binders (http://www.livebinders.com/b/2651124)
- Center on Transition Innovations (https://centerontransition.org/transition/Covid19/index.html?fbclid=IwAR3YQSCK_405k74YAf4LHDishe0sIIXgieS5Ocugkoq2E61n4N0PeExJVkg)

Topic Focus: Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19

> **"This [Youth Voices Community Forum] is something I can look back on and, if nothing else was going right, I was able to attend a meeting and be heard and hear other people and it was really helpful for me"**

What challenges/barriers are you facing in meeting the mental health needs of youth/young adults with disabilities during this pandemic?

- Not able to meet with young adults in person
- Hard to find employment
- People with mental health issues not able to see their therapists
- Receiving Information about the pandemic and what to do if feeling sick
- People are not coming together to support youth with disabilities like they should be
- Social media can be positive but also very toxic

What are some positive aspects/techniques we have developed? Are folks considering going more virtual in the future?

- Zoom has been a resource
- Helpful having a platform to consistently connect with groups of other youth working toward social equity virtually
- Social media has had impact on awareness
- Sharing positive material on social media to distract from negativity
- Virtual meetings have taken away transportation barrier
- Meetings such as the Youth Voices Community Forum help youth use their voice

How can we work toward a more equitable future for youth with disabilities who face mental health challenges?

- We should not just go back to how things were before the pandemic.
- Still want to be heard even after the pandemic
- Think about how technology can be a resource even after the pandemic
- Set routines and tips for virtual learning and anxiety
- Keep doing virtual meetings such as this where youth voices can be heard. After everything is done, youth still need support
- When looking at the mental health impact of the pandemic, we need to look at the whole picture of everything going on

- Make resources available in rural areas, examples; pop-up clinics for counseling and medication distribution, meditation/exercise activities

Topic Focus: Family Challenges including Access to Basic Needs + Health Care during the Pandemic

> **"Having compassion will be a big part of moving forward."**

What are the challenges and barriers to meeting the needs of youth with disabilities during the pandemic as it relates to the challenges their families are going through?

- It is hard to do scans and lab work, longer wait times
- Each family composition is different. But, as soon as one person or multiple people in a family loses their job it becomes a snowball effect. Loss of income, loss of healthcare insurance, cannot pay rent or mortgage, utilities, etc.
- Feel the stress family members feel
- Not everyone knows how to access ACA after losing health insurance through employer.
- Finding employment
- Not being able to provide face-to-face services for youth
- Hard for people who lost their employer healthcare to get access to things like Medicare or Medicaid. It requires a mountain of paperwork and phone calls.

What are those strategies and resources we can use to support youth and young adults with disabilities?

- Get connected to the right resources
- Connect and collaborate with other entities doing the same work
- Create cohesive services so youth do not have to look for what they need in different places
- Support groups
- Virtual job opportunities
- Case managers through insurance
- Establish a connection with the participants your organization is serving

What do we want the new normal to be?

- Within each agency they should be able to have tough conversations and acknowledge the disparity that exists in access to resources

- More youth should have access to remote work opportunities

Recommended resources

- Insurance case manager
- Grass roots mutual aid – natural network, different states Facebook pages
- People who are willing to help out with different things such as going grocery shopping or picking up medication
- Mutualaidhub.org
- Centers for independent living
- Housing assistance, medical equipment, assistance with self-advocacy, support groups including groups in Spanish

About IEL

Founded in 1964, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) partners with under-resourced communities to equip leaders to better prepare children, youth, adults, and families for postsecondary education and training, rewarding careers, and civic and community engagement.

IEL has assisted public and private sector leaders with transforming the next generation of talent, including youth and young adults with disabilities from under-resourced communities. These partnerships have prepared and supported thousands of young people as they advance their careers and make meaningful, long-lasting contributions to our society and economy.

IEL works with service providers at the local, state, and national levels to prepare and support youth and young adults with disabilities for successful transitions into productive careers and financial independence. We also work directly with emerging and existing leaders in the disability community to advance our shared goal of full inclusion.

For more information about the Institute for Educational Leadership, visit: http://iel.org/

About Right Turn

The Right Turn Career-Focused Transition Initiative (Right Turn) provides a career development process for youth who are involved with or at risk of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system. Funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (DOL-ETA) and led by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), Right Turn is implemented in high-crime and high-poverty communities across the country by non-profit and local organizations with expertise in career development, education, mentoring, youth development, juvenile justice, and disability.

Right Turn provides individualized education, training, and workforce development opportunities by engaging youth in a three-phase career development process that includes self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management. Youth meet regularly with program staff, mentors, and other caring adults to develop and implement an Individualized Career Development Plan (ICDP). Through weekly goal setting based on each youth's ICDP, Right Turn promotes employment, continued learning opportunities, and independent living.

About RAMP

The Ready to Achieve Mentoring Program (RAMP)™ is a high-tech, career-focused mentoring program for youth involved with or at risk of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system. Funded by four grants from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and led by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), RAMP is being implemented across the country by state and local organizations with expertise in mentoring, youth development, juvenile justice, and disability. The RAMP model uses a combination of group, peer, and one-on-one mentoring to promote the successful transition of RAMP youth to employment, continued learning opportunities, and independent living.

Youth participate in weekly career preparation-focused group meetings, including peer-supported goal setting and exploration of careers in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Each youth meets regularly one-on-one with a mentor to develop and implement an Individualized Mentoring Plan (IMP). Mentors are caring adults recruited from the community, schools, employers, and partner organizations. Youths' families, teachers, and support network are engaged in career fairs, college visits, and extended learning activities. While in RAMP™, youth have the opportunity to assess and explore their own career interests; develop a plan and set goals for their transition; create a resource map of their community's high-tech industries; gain workplace soft skills; build resume-writing and interviewing skills; interact with employers and experience a variety of work settings; give and receive peer support; take advantage of group and personal leadership opportunities; design and build a high-tech-related team project, and most importantly… have fun!

About IEL's Youth Transition Data Reports

The 2019 Youth Transition Report: Outcomes for Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities, published by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), presents data that underscore the gap between youth with disabilities and those without disabilities on measures of success in education and employment. The report also includes data on those opportunity youth whom the education and workforce systems have not adequately engaged, served, and supported.

While other reports present information about the working-age adult population or children with disabilities, the 2019 Youth Transition Report focuses on the 14-24-year-old age group—youth and young adults with disabilities. Federal and state policy and funding supports the successful transition of this population through education and into careers, however, statistics are not typically reported for the 14-24 age population. IEL

produced this report to address this need through a data snapshot of the outcomes of this funding and gaps between youth and young adults with and without disabilities.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Youth Technical Assistance Center (VR Y-TAC) funded by the US Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, is creating 2020 Vocational Rehabilitation Youth Technical Assistance Center State Reports to support vocational rehabilitation (VR) state agencies to better understand the complexity and context of the data on youth and young adults with disabilities and the persistent gaps in educational and employment outcomes for this group. The report presents statistics for youth and young adults with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 24, including those youth whom education and workforce systems have failed to adequately support, to highlight the needs of this transition age population. The report will provide VR agency staff as well as other practitioners, policymakers, and researchers with data to better understand and serve this population.