

Expanding Work-Based Learning to Students with Disabilities in Chicago: A Proposed Pilot Program

By Sophia Eisenberg

Advocates' Forum

Abstract

This proposal describes a workforce development program utilizing work-based learning for students with disabilities within Chicago Public Schools (CPS). It is known that students with disabilities experience structural barriers to accessing employment opportunities, which is evident in the bidirectional relationship between poverty and disability. This proposal consists of a program that unifies components of existing programs within Chicago, programming at the federal level, and services for students with disabilities. Its long-term goal is alleviating poverty for those with disabilities. Funding from the American Rescue Plan will fill the void between lack of targeted workforce development opportunities for students with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities, one of the largest minority groups in the country, are three times more likely to live in poverty than those without a disability (National Council on Disability, 2020). Indeed, poverty increases the risk of being or becoming disabled and having a disability increases the risk of living in poverty (Goodman et al., n.d.). Black and Latinx persons with disabilities experience even higher rates of poverty. This is in part from high unemployment rates but also because persons with disabilities who are in the labor market earn 63 cents for every dollar a person without disabilities earns for the same work (Stern, 2019). The lack of existing education and job preparation programs exacerbate these economic outcomes.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) lists 13 disabilities for students: 1) autism, 2) deaf blindness, 3) deafness, 4) emotional disturbance, 5) hearing impairment, 6) intellectual disability, 7) multiple disabilities, 8) orthopedic impairment, 9) other health impairment (OHI), 10) specific learning disability (SLD), 11) speech or language impairment (SLI), 12) traumatic brain injury (TBI), and 13) visual impairment (Dragoo, 2020). Students who have one or more of these disabilities are twice as likely as their peers without disabilities to be suspended, three times more likely to be arrested, and are more prone to be victims of violent crimes (Chicago Community, 2015). These adverse outcomes are in turn associated with lower levels of academic achievement and fewer economic opportunities (Goodman et al., n.d.).

Research suggests that employment interventions for persons with disabilities starting in high school can improve outcomes by more precisely targeting their unique needs (National Council on Disability, 2020). Due to their proximity to youth, high schools are well situated to implement such initiatives. Indeed, targeted interventions for high school students with disabilities through an expansion of employment opportunities is a promising strategy for alleviating poverty. The City of Chicago has a unique ability to implement such youth interventions because new work-based learning (WBL) initiatives would readily align with, and augment, its existing city, state, and federal programs.

The Framework of Current Job Programs

During the 1960s War on Poverty, the Department of Labor created multiple job programs (focused though they may have been on “able-bodied” persons). Federal funding for such programs began to dissipate in 1985, when funding for employment programs and funding for youth-related employment programs plummeted by more than half (Quadagno, 1996). There was, however, a resurgence of support for youth employment opportunities in the form of the 2014

Workforce Innovation Act (WIOA) and the 2018 Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V).

The WIOA systematizes national employment initiatives for youth and persons with *significant* disabilities—primarily through Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)—and the Department of Education disperses funds to state agencies for these initiatives (Bishop & Fimian, 2020). Special education programming in schools is entitlement-based through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandates transition plans to help students prepare for their post-secondary education and career (Hughes & Avoke, 2010). Despite the mandate, many students with disabilities do not receive comprehensive plans and are deprived of equitable exposure to career education. This widens the economic gap between students with and without disabilities. Additionally, unlike the entitlement-based services for persons with disabilities in school, VR services are eligibility based, creating service gaps when students with disabilities transition from those IDEA services to the eligibility-based adult employment system (National Council on Disability, 2020).

Compared to national averages, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) serves a higher number of students who are from low-income families, identify as Black or Latinx, and have one or more disabilities. As indicated above, students of color with disabilities are at high risk for unemployment (National Council on Disability, 2020). The City of Chicago has an existing summer youth employment program, One Summer Chicago, that offers a form of work-based learning (WBL). Research shows, however, that the most significant outcome of its current format is violence prevention (with only a modest effect on long-term employment outcomes) (Lansing et al., 2018).

A New Program for Students in Chicago

The City of Chicago needs to improve and expand its support of students with disabilities and funding from the 2021 American Rescue Plan gives the city the opportunity to create a new, needed work-based learning (WBL) program. Such a program could address

both group-based (students with disabilities) and place-based inequities (high schools in Chicago in historically underserved neighborhoods) since simultaneously targeting these students and schools is the best way to lower poverty rates (Chicago City Council, 2021). This proposed WBL program could effectively draw on resources from a diverse set of departments within the City of Chicago, including the Mayor's Office for Persons with Disabilities (MOPD), the Department of Family Support Services (DFSS), and Chicago Public School's Office of Diverse Learner Supports and Services (ODLSS). It would not replace the existing youth employment opportunities, but build on them.

This proposal suggests starting with a four-year pilot program in September 2023, with 38 high schools to take part. The city's economic hardship index lists fifteen neighborhoods as having the highest need and the chosen schools would be within these neighborhoods (Wilson et al., 2019). These schools are characterized by multiple demographic indicators associated with adverse economic outcomes for their students (Hughes & Avoke, 2010), including higher proportions of students with disabilities, those who are low-income, and those who identify as persons of color.

This would be a year-round program, extending the existing summer youth employment projects within the City of Chicago. It would draw from both the entitlement-based Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) services and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies, as well as integrate curriculum designed to improve the employment outcomes of students with disabilities. By drawing on the principles of work-based learning—integrating academic, technical, or employability skills in a work environment—such a program would be a crucial intervention to improve economic outcomes through positive employment and an increase in academic achievement (Ross et al., 2020).

This program is designed to use a WBL continuum—career awareness, career exploration, career preparation, and career training.

At the same time, in alignment with VR training detailed in the Workforce Innovation Act (WIOA), it integrates standards specifically designed to support students with disabilities, including work readiness training, job exploration counseling, and instruction in self-advocacy (Ross et al., 2020). Within work readiness training, instruction focuses on building capacity for skills that will allow students to maintain competitive employment, such as “twenty-first-century skills” (National Council on Disability, 2020). Combining the WBL continuum structures and standards aligned with VR training promises to provide comprehensive services that allow students with disabilities to build skills both during high school and into post-secondary employment. Research posits that year-round WBL services starting as early as age 14 are most effective at helping students achieve a successful post-secondary transition (Brand et al., 2013; National Council on Disability, 2020).

Students enrolled in this program would therefore start at the beginning of their ninth-grade year, with iterations for each subsequent grade level. At the end of each school year, they would access a comprehensive program that would have similarities to One Summer Chicago but offer employment opportunities *and* social-emotional learning. Acknowledging the complex needs and backgrounds of the students, there would be 25 hours of employment for six weeks and 10 hours/week of CBT-based interventions during this summer period. As the program grows, new students could connect with students in existing cohorts. This element would contribute to a network for future employment, life support, and a sense of community. Students would earn \$15 an hour, amounting to a \$3,000 summer stipend funded by the City of Chicago, given a Chromebook, a mobile Wi-Fi hotspot to use throughout the program to participate in work activities, and an unlimited Ventra pass to use during the length of the summer program.

Programs of this scale require intensive coordination among key stakeholders. In this case, the City of Chicago is well-positioned to take responsibility for the coordination of the program and disperse

funds to the relevant agencies. The Chicago Public School's Office of Diverse Learner Supports and Services (ODLSS) has the potential to hire and train the required social workers, who would not only implement the curriculum, but coordinate with both the employer partners and the student's special education case manager to ensure compliance with their Individual Education Plans. If ODLSS can hire 20 managers to oversee those caseworkers and hire curriculum specialists to develop a WBL curriculum, they could join up to 20 career specialists working at the City of Chicago—within the MOPD, the Mayor's Office, and Department of Family Support Services (DFSS). Caseworkers could work with MOPD to coordinate effective professional development for employee-partners to educate employers on best-supporting employees with disabilities and breaking the stigma associated with hiring employees with disabilities.

Although adjustments will be needed when implementing this program beyond the parameters of the pilot, investment in WBL in high schools—specifically targeted for students with disabilities—can contribute to generating more equitable employment outcomes and thereby reducing poverty. The hope is to have, eventually, the program scaled to establish it at all schools throughout Chicago and beyond. The short-term goals of poverty reduction include increased academic achievement, decreased dropout rates, reduced youth arrests, reduced exposure to violence, and increased employment rates for participants. The long-term goals of the program reflect the bidirectional relationship between poverty and disability in which lower-income students are more likely to be diagnosed with a disability, and students with disabilities are more likely to experience cycles of poverty. By promoting educational and workforce development, the program will mediate the impact of disability on the well-being of program participants.

Conclusion

Alternative options to addressing poverty for students with disabilities include expanding summer programs like One Summer Chicago to include more students with disabilities. Such an approach would not sufficiently meet the complex needs of Chicago students with disabilities, which is why a more comprehensive program is necessary. The proposed program is indeed an upfront financial investment and as a new program there would need to be comprehensive program evaluation and research efforts to determine efficacy in relation to both the short- and long-term goals. Program evaluators must understand the “institutional and organizational environments” in which they are working to accurately assess the program’s effectiveness and poverty-reduction impact in the long-term (Allard & Small, 2013).

In addition to evaluating effectiveness, program developers must also consider any unintended consequences of this programming. Although it has been proven that WBL programs are effective for students with disabilities, programming must not interfere with the minutes of academic intervention that are written into IEPs for students and some students might require more intensive intervention than others. In future iterations of this proposed program, coordinators might consider supplementing summer programming with targeted academic interventions so that students can continue to work on their academic skills through the summer.

Furthermore, it is essential to investigate how the earnings from this proposed program might impact students’ eligibility for Social Security Insurance (SSI), as it is an eligibility-based program based on the severity of a student’s disability and the student's financial need. Depending on the exact number of hours a student works in this proposed program, they might exceed the \$1,350 per month income cap that would disqualify most students from receiving SSI. However, there is a way to maintain SSI benefits and earnings from this proposed program through “a Plan to Achieve Self-Support (PASS),” which allows students to save income earned for future educational and employment needs while still receiving SSI benefits (Social

Security Administration, 2022). It is paramount that program coordinators, case managers, and related providers are informed on the complexities of these programs to help students and their families navigate these challenges.

The influx of funding from the American Rescue Plan will allow the City of Chicago to invest in transformative programs throughout the city, specifically for youth with disabilities. Systems across the city must work intentionally to prioritize workforce development for students with disabilities to mitigate the bidirectional relationship between poverty and disability. The specific program proposed, which incorporates Work-Based Learning, will work to address these gaps through a multi-prong approach.

Author Note

When focusing on preventing youth violence in students with disabilities, I incorporated my experience as a special education teacher with the interdisciplinary nature of my social work education. Through my years as a teacher and case manager in Chicago, I realized that there was a lack of coordination between services provided to students with disabilities in school and services provided externally; this service gap contributed to barriers that students with disabilities already face. While recognizing the transforming work already being implemented by the City of Chicago, I also saw the need for service coordination that would not increase teachers' workload but augment their work while providing support and improving student outcomes. Throughout the course of developing this proposed program, I reflected on the unique role of social workers in spearheading service coordination efforts due to our training across systems.

References

Allard, S. W., & Small, M. L. (2013). Reconsidering the urban disadvantaged: The role of systems, institutions, and organizations.

The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 647, 6-20.

Bishop, M. M., & Fimian, T. (2020, August). *Vocational rehabilitation: Opportunities for better collaboration under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*. American Enterprise Institute.

<https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Vocational-Rehabilitation.pdf?x91208>

Brand, B., Valent, A., & Danielson, L. (2013, March). *Improving college and career readiness for students with disabilities*. College & Career Readiness & Success Center.

<https://ccrscenter.org/sites/default/files/Improving%20College%20and%20Career%20Readiness%20for%20Students%20with%20Disabilities.pdf>

Chicago City Council. (2021). *American Rescue Plan recommendation*. Chicago.

<https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/COFA/ProposedBudget/COFA-Recommendation--American-Rescue-Plan-Amended.pdf>

Chicago Community Trust. (2015). *Youth and disability*.

http://cct.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/InformAndAct_YouthAndDisability.pdf

Goodman, N., Morris, M., Boston, K., & Walton, D. (n.d.). *Financial inequality: Disability, race and poverty in America*. National Disability Institute. <https://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/disability-race-poverty-in-america.pdf>

Dragoo, K. E. (2020, October 12). *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: A comparison of state eligibility criteria*. Congressional Research Service.

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46566>

Hughes, C., & Avoke, S. K. (2010). The elephant in the room: Poverty, disability, and employment. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 35(1-2), 5-14.

Lansing, J., Carreon, E., & Schlecht, C. (2018). *Using qualitative research to uncover the mechanisms of One Summer Chicago: What makes summer youth employment programs meaningful for youth*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

<https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Final-OSC-Report.pdf>

National Council on Disability. (2020, July 24). *2020 progress report on national disability policy*.

https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD_Progress_Report_508_0.pdf

Quadagno, J. (1996). *The color of welfare: How racism undermined the war on poverty*. Oxford University Press.

Ross, M., Kazis, R., Bateman, N., & Stateler, L. (2020, November 20). *Work-based learning can advance equity and opportunity for America's young people*. Brookings Institution.

https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20201120_BrookingsMetro_Work-based-learning_Final_Report.pdf

Sheely, A. (2012). Devolution and welfare reform: Re-evaluating "success." *Social Work*, 57(4), 321–331.

Social Security Administration. (2022). *Benefits for children with disabilities*. <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10026.pdf>

Stern, D. (2019, April 11). *The youth opportunity guarantee: A framework for success*. Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality.

Retrieved December 9, 2021, from

<http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Youth-Opportunity-Guarantee-20190411.pdf>

Wilson, M., Taylor, A., & Linares, A. (2019, December 13). *2017 Chicago community area economic hardship index*. UIC Great Cities Institute.

<https://greatcities.uic.edu/2019/12/13/fact-sheet-chicago-community-area-economic-hardship-index-2017/>

Author Biography

Sophia Eisenberg is a first-year master's student in the Transforming Justice program at the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice. After graduating from the University of Michigan, Sophia became a high school special education teacher in Chicago. After graduation, she hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in Social Work, researching the intersection of education and legal systems.

Return to the 2022 issue of *Advocates' Forum*