

*ETA Priorities for Youth Workforce Development:  
Equity, Job Quality, Mental Health, and Youth Voice.*

**Vision**

The Department envisions a no-wrong-door youth workforce system that offers seamless access to resources, programs, and wrap around services; offers guaranteed paid work experiences for young people; and coordinates with critical partners—including but not limited to employers, sector-based industry coalitions, workforce intermediaries, labor unions, and philanthropy—committed to high quality career pathways for young workers.

**Priorities**

**Equity:** On January 21, 2021, his first day in office, President Biden issued [Executive Order 13985 On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#). The Executive Order defines equity “as the consistent and systemic, fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment.”

Advancing equity to ensure youth have equal access to and outcomes in high quality education and training is a key priority for the Department. Equity must be integrated into everything programs do; from outreach and recruitment to service delivery strategies to partnership development and to using data to inform decision making. Equity in the WIOA Youth program means that not only do youth have equitable access to services and supports but also that youth are achieving equitable outcomes.

On January 20, 2022, ETA hosted a webinar, “Technical Assistance to Meet Equity Goals in WIOA Youth Programs” which reviewed resources and provided audience members an opportunity to share their technical assistance needs as it relates to how WIOA youth providers can improve youth outcomes through more equitable and inclusive programming. Presenters and audience members on this webinar engaged in a rich discussion of what integrating equity principles into WIOA youth programming can look like. ETA encourages those who were unable to attend the webinar to view the recording of the webinar at: <https://www.workforcegps.org/events/2021/10/25/19/36/Technical-Assistance-to-Meet-Equity-Goals-in-WIOA-Youth-Programs>. For additional resources on equity, visit: <https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2022/08/08/19/05/Resources-on-Advancing-Workforce-Equity-for-Youth>.

Additional information on integrating equity into workforce development programming can be found at: <https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2022/08/08/19/05/Resources-on-Advancing-Workforce-Equity-for-Youth>

**Job Quality:** Ensuring equity in WIOA Youth programs means that programs must not only connect youth to a job, but ensure youth have access to quality jobs by creating opportunities for on-ramps to quality career pathways. The Department leads the [Good Jobs Initiative](#), focused on job quality by providing “critical information to workers, employers, and

government as they work to improve job quality and create access to good jobs free from discrimination and harassment.” The Department, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Commerce created eight principles framework, known as the [Good Jobs Principles](#), for a shared vision of job quality. These principles focus on hiring and recruitment; family-sustaining benefits for full- and part-time workers; diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the workplace; empowerment and representation; job security and working conditions that include a safe and healthy workplace; pay that is stable and a living wage; and skills and career advancement opportunities to progress to good jobs.

[TEGL 07-22](#), *Increasing Employer and Workforce System Customer Access to Good Jobs*, defines a good job, explains why job quality is important, and outlines how the workforce system integrates good job strategies into its employer relationships and workforce training. It also clarifies the workforce system’s role as supporter and developer of good jobs, in an effort to make the workforce system more equitable and responsive to worker and business needs. Strong State and Local Workforce Development Boards and State Workforce Agencies use the information in that guidance to develop a strategy for identifying and creating long-term partnerships with employers offering good jobs; helping other employers to provide good jobs; and creating strategic, flexible career pathways to good jobs that respond to local labor market needs.

**Quality Work Experiences:** Integrating equity and job quality principles into the WIOA Youth program is achieved by ensuring youth have access to quality work experiences, in particular, paid work experience whenever possible, that have on-ramps to career pathways. The decade between ages 14 and 24 is marked by critical transitions as youth begin to enter adulthood and make decisions about how to continue their education or enter the workforce. The opportunities and support available to young people during this time influences their long-term trajectories into adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Early employment represents one experience that is generally associated with better labor and wage outcomes in the future, potentially because it helps youth to develop soft skills, a job history, and connections to employer networks.<sup>2</sup>

Early employment is also an experience that youth and young adults from low-income households have greater difficulty accessing than higher-income peers.<sup>3</sup> Black and Hispanic teenagers from low-income households experience even greater challenges in the labor market due to structural barriers to opportunities faced by people of color in the American job market.<sup>4</sup> This inherent inequity makes it critical that the WIOA Youth program provide quality work experience opportunities to youth participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL);

[https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publication/SYEP\\_EvidenceReview-5.25.22.pdf](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publication/SYEP_EvidenceReview-5.25.22.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kahn, Lisa B. 2010. “The Long-Term Labor Market Consequences of Graduating from College in a Bad Economy.” *Labour Economics* 17, no. 2 (April): 303–316. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2009.09.002>; Neumark, David. 2002. “Youth Labor Markets in the United States: Shopping around vs. Staying Put.” *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 84, no. 3: 462–482. <https://doi.org/10.1162/003465302320259475>.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Sum, Andrew, Ishwar Khatiwada, Mykhaylo Trubskyy, Martha Ross, Walter McHugh, and Sheila Palma. 2014. “The Plummeting Labor Market Fortunes of Teens and Young Adults.” Brookings Institution. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Youth\\_Workforce\\_Report\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Youth_Workforce_Report_FINAL-1.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Spievack. 2019. “For People of Color, Employment Disparities Start Early.” Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/people-color-employment-disparities-start-early>.

According to MDRC’s meta-analysis on career pathway programs, [systematic biases](#), especially against people of color and women, social networks that limit which jobs and employers workers can connect to, and employers’ strong preference to hire those who already have relevant work experience can all combine to make it difficult for people to get access to employers and careers that offer family-supporting wages. Work-based learning can help offset those disadvantages by using a college or training program’s relationships and credibility to open doors. Apprenticeships offer another potential avenue by which work-based learning could increase college completion rates, earnings, and equity, if they were expanded to include more diverse participants. Apprenticeships are already often connected to colleges that deliver classroom training components leading to college credentials.”

In addition to ensuring youth have access to paid work experience opportunities, it is critical that such work experiences be in industries and occupations that put youth on a career pathway to high quality jobs. As discussed in CLASP’s research brief entitled *Toward a Vision of Quality Summer Employment for All Youth*, recent interviews with Summer Youth Employment Program funders, providers, advocates, and participants in six U.S. cities explored what it would take to guarantee a high-quality summer job to all youth. Among the insights that emerged, one theme became clear: Young people want more than a summer job; they want career-focused work experience that is worth their time and responsive to their day-to-day realities.<sup>5</sup> Creating targeted job opportunities with deliberate focus on equity and exposing youth to careers and connecting them to social networks in fields where they are underrepresented will help youth enter career pathways that will lead to family-sustaining wages.”

**Apprenticeships and Pre-Apprenticeships:** One way to connect youth to work experiences that will lead to career pathways is through pre-apprenticeship and Registered Apprenticeship opportunities. Registered Apprenticeship programs (RAP) offer learn while you earn opportunities and are appropriate for many youth participants. The average wage for a RAP completer is \$70,000, and 94 percent of completers retain employment.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, RAP participants earn an average of \$98,718 more than nonparticipants over their career.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, many individuals, including youth, have faced significant barriers to accessing RAPs. Quality pre-apprenticeship programs, however, can play a key role in removing these barriers and creating accessible pathways to RAPs and to rewarding careers. While a quality pre-apprenticeship program can play a valuable role in providing work-based learning for all Americans, as identified in recent evaluations of the American Apprenticeship Initiative (AAI) grant program, pre-apprenticeship programs may also serve as an effective tool for promoting DEIA by helping individuals facing barriers to employment acquire the practical and foundational skills needed to successfully participate in the workforce and to gain entry into RAPs. Pre-apprenticeship programs use varied program strategies which place an

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<sup>5</sup> CLASP, [https://www.clasp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022\\_TowardAVision.pdf](https://www.clasp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022_TowardAVision.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> “*Career Seeker Fact Sheet*,” (September 2020), Department of Labor;

<sup>7</sup> Reed, Debbie, et al., “*An Effectiveness Assessment and Cost-Benefit Analysis of Registered Apprenticeship in 10 States*,” (July 2012), Mathematica.

individual on the potential career pathway to employability through a RAP. They utilize a wide range of program designs and approaches, and often vary in duration to meet the needs of diverse populations and employers.

The Department has invested significant funding in recent years on building pre-apprenticeship and RAPs for youth and encourages states and local areas to work with their apprenticeship partners to leverage and align WIOA Youth program resources and further expand these quality work and learning opportunities. The Department encourages states and local areas to develop or strengthen existing relationships with their State Apprenticeship Agency in those states that have them or with an ETA Apprenticeship and Training Representative in states that don't have a State Apprenticeship Agency.

**Mental Health:** The workforce system must play a key role in addressing the youth mental health crisis. Even before the pandemic, demand for mental health services was increasing, especially for our nation's young people. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the situation, subjecting many young Americans to social isolation, loss of routines, and traumatic grief<sup>8</sup>. These challenges are documented in the White House's Fact Sheet: Improving Access and Care for Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Conditions found at:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/19/fact-sheet-improving-access-and-care-for-youth-mental-health-and-substance-use-conditions/>.

Additionally, in December 2021, the Office of the Surgeon General released an advisory report, "Protecting Young People's Mental Health," found at <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf> in which the devastating impacts of the pandemic and the alarming increases in mental health needs of young people are outlined.

In August 2022, the Department hosted a webinar entitled: *Supporting Youth Mental Health in the Workforce System*, where the Office of the Surgeon General presented on its Advisory mentioned above, National Youth Employment Coalition provided an overview of the findings from their report summarizing findings from their national survey, entitled:

[\*Identifying Gaps in Youth Employment Programs' Capacity to Address Youth Mental Health Needs\*](#), and offered policy and practice solutions, and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration showcased a number of resources that may be useful to program practitioners when helping youth access mental health services and supports. The webinar recording is available at:

<https://www.workforcegps.org/events/2022/07/01/18/50/Supporting-Youth-Mental-Health-in-the-Workforce-System>.

During the webinar, ETA showcased the Youth Mental Health Resource Guide which was designed to help youth workforce practitioners deliver on the WIOA youth program element of providing youth with comprehensive guidance and counseling. The Resource guide can be found at: <https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2022/08/16/15/26/Youth-Mental-Health-Resource-Guide>.

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<sup>8</sup> The White House, FACT SHEET: Improving Access and Care for Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Conditions, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/19/fact-sheet-improving-access-and-care-for-youth-mental-health-and-substance-use-conditions/>.

**Trauma-Informed Care.** Trauma is a major contributor of poor mental health. When working with youth it is important to understand the effects trauma may have. Trauma affects the way a person learns, plans, and interacts with others; a young person may be combative, non-responsive at times, or misuse substances to cope with these past traumas. Youth programs have increasingly adopted different types of trauma-informed care approaches, which seek to support individuals who have experienced trauma or distressing events in their lives. Several local programs have adopted trauma-informed care into their program offering. ETA encourages all WIOA Youth program providers to fully incorporate trauma-informed care principles and practices into program planning, staffing, training, and implementation.

Resources on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care can be found at:

<https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2020/03/24/11/13/Resources-on-Trauma-and-Trauma-Informed-Care>. These resources can help workforce system providers better understand the impacts of trauma on the young people they serve and that professional development and training in trauma-informed care is critical to achieving positive outcomes. ETA will continue to share up-to-date resources and research and encourages the system to fully integrate trauma-informed practices into service delivery to help youth feel safe, supported, and engaged while participating in education, training, and employment.

**Youth Voice:** Youth play an important role in strengthening programs and improving youth outcomes. Empowering youth to identify and respond to community needs helps them become leaders and assist them in civic engagement. Finding ways to incorporate youth in program development, recruitment strategies, and execution of activities is pivotal. The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, composed of representatives from 22 federal agencies that support programs and services focusing on youth, created a tool, [“Assessing Youth Involvement and Engagement,”](#) to assist organizations and community partnerships in determining how they involve youth in programs, whether youth are becoming more engaged in the community, and if certain strategies are helping to retain youth. ETA created a tip sheet entitled, [“Civic Engagement for Leadership Development,”](#) which notes that by supporting youth in finding the issues they are passionate about increases their investment. Involving youth as partners in making decisions that affect them increases the likelihood the decisions will be accepted and adopted. Further, providing participants a safe platform to express their ideas, opinions, and advice to others is pivotal in developing leadership skills, which is a requirement of the WIOA Youth program.

Youth involvement can benefit organizations and their programs as well as the youth themselves. Youth voices assist programs with assessing the resources required to meet the needs of current and future participants. Learning from best practices shared from the IWGYP, programs developed in partnership with youth are more likely to be effective at engaging the population and, therefore, to have a greater impact. States and local programs are encouraged to engage youth in leadership development opportunities to enhance their confidence, employability, self-determination, and other positive social behaviors.

For more resources on how programs can engage youth and incorporate youth voices into their programs, visit: <https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2022/08/08/17/41/Resources-on-Engaging-Youth-Voice>.