A Prismatic, Participatory Approach to Policy Research – Stakeholder Driven Policy Recommendations to Improve the Delivery of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to Students with Serious Mental Health Conditions

Emma L. Narkewicz, MPA; Marsha L. Ellison, PhD; Hannah E. Seward, PhD

Background

Youth & young adults with serious mental health conditions (SMHC) have extremely poor education & employment outcomes

- 35% of students in special education with SMHC dropped out of high school before receiving a diploma in 2015-2016
- 53% of former special education students with SMHC out of school for up to 6 years found competitive employment in 2007
- Only 10% of students with SMHC are served in special education

The Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 nationally mandates that state agencies of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students with disabilities to improve their transition to employment.

The 5 Pre-ETS activities are:
- Job exploration counseling
- Work-based learning experiences
- Counseling on opportunities for post-secondary education programs or training
- Workplace readiness training to develop social & independent living skills
- Instruction in self-advocacy

In 2019, the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) modified its model of Pre-ETS delivery to accord with WIOA:
- Expanded Pre-ETS eligibility to youth ages 14-15
- Added a new category of “potentially eligible” students that includes those not in special education
- Shifted to more generalized services to a larger population of students

Research Question & Methods

What are the barriers and facilitators to accessing Pre-ETS for students with serious mental health conditions in MA?

- We employed a mixed-methods participatory approach, engaging Pre-ETS stakeholders through surveys, interviews, & focus groups.
- We received guidance from a family & student advisory board & from subject matter experts & MRC leadership.

Results

Family focus group (n = 5) key themes:

1. Parents have difficult experiences with planning for youth transition after high school
2. Parents need more knowledge & greater communication about Pre-ETS
3. Pre-ETS delivery & content determine engagement & perceived service quality

Vendor (n = 29) & area director (n = 17) survey results:

- The top benefit of the new Pre-ETS model was more direct student exposure to & preparation for the workforce
- The top way to improve Pre-ETS was better engagement of students through tiered services & paid internships
- Vendors need more training to better serve students with SMHC
- Special educators & high school staff were the main referral sources for potentially eligible students in Pre-ETS
- Relationships with students & families are key to Pre-ETS retention

Vendor interview key findings (n = 3):

- They saved value in Pre-ETS to prepare them for finding a job & living independently
- Students receiving Pre-ETS were able to clearly articulate their employment & post-secondary education goals
- Students had varying preferences about the format of Pre-ETS delivery (e.g., virtual vs. in person, 1-on-1 vs. group services)

Discussion

Overall, while the expanded eligibility to Pre-ETS is a positive change, many students & families desire individualized, tiered supports, & internship experiences, which can counter the new model. Despite expanded eligibility, referrals to Pre-ETS still primarily come from special education. Family & students who did receive Pre-ETS wanted earlier access & better communication. More must be done to support the transition of students with SMHC in MA.

Policy & Practice Recommendations

- Communicate to families & students earlier about Pre-ETS to allow for proactive planning
- Create a “menu” of available services, eligibility information, & relevant agencies so families & youth are empowered & informed about their options
- Incorporate a discussion of Pre-ETS into IEP meetings & coordinate school-based resources to fill service gaps
- Provide specialized training to contracted Pre-ETS vendors on working with students with SMHC
- Engage community & state mental health & social services agencies to refer more students with SMHC to Pre-ETS
- Clarify the mission & value of Pre-ETS to high school staff & leadership to improve the school-vendor relationship & school buy-in
- Implement virtual signatures on parental forms

References Cited: