Project PEACE:

Promoting Employment After high school through Community Expertise

Community Landscape Analysis, 1.0

2022

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, less than half of the population of Virginians with a disability were employed, and there is a prominent gap in employment rates between Virginians with and without a disability (VBPD, 2022). In 2020, the employment rate of people with a range of cognitive disabilities lagged about 45% behind the percent of employed people without disabilities in Virginia (Paul et al., 2021). Efforts to increase employment rates among people with disabilities may be most effective beginning in childhood and extending to transition, a period when high school and postsecondary students with disabilities receive services and education related to independent living, postsecondary education and employment after high school.

Project PEACE (Promoting Employment After high school through Community Expertise) is a multi-year project focused on improving transition and employment outcomes for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), specifically in the cities of Richmond and Colonial Heights, Virginia. Led by the Partnership for People with Disabilities within Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education, this community-engaged work is using several research strategies, including photovoice, community conversations, virtual-asset mapping, and data-gathering to develop and implement a collaborative community plan for employment.

1.1. Community-Driven Community Landscape Analysis

Understanding and respecting the value of a community's culture, resources, and lived experiences are necessary prerequisites for developing and implementing successful plans for community employment. Project PEACE is directly collaborating with Virginia communities to better understand barriers to competitive, integrated employment for people with disabilities and to generate novel solutions for employment. This information will be used to develop and implement employment transition plans for youth with IDD that are anchored in community strengths.

This emerging plan, which will outline a process for paid work-based learning for students with IDD that participate largely in "intensive supports" special education classrooms, will be informed by community-based research efforts and anchored in the voices of youth with IDD, their families, educators, providers, professionals, employers, and community leaders. This Community Landscape Analysis (CLA) will ground planning efforts in community knowledge. As a dynamic document, the CLA will be modified periodically to reflect ongoing research efforts, significant findings, and major project outcomes.

1.2. Report Overview

This CLA shares our findings from community data-gathering, community conversations, business needs assessments as well as preliminary findings from photovoice initiatives. It will include information about existing transition services and agencies that serve youth and adults with disabilities in our communities, current and past community and research-based projects surrounding employment and transition, and some trends in employment for people with disabilities over the past several decades. To wrap up our literature review of scholarly work and organizational/government reports, we synthesize across these sources to share themes including barriers and solutions to employment, alongside recommendations for future scholarly work on employment and transition.

The second section of this report describes one small-scale employer needs assessment and two community-based methodologies employed by Project PEACE: community conversations and

photovoice. Here, we report on our methods, data analysis, and major findings for community conversations that were conducted in the summer and fall of 2021. We also share preliminary findings for a photovoice study that is currently underway. The CLA concludes with future directions for Project PEACE that are informed by our participatory research results.

2. Transition Assets

Many agencies, organizations, and research centers have long contributed to improving employment outcomes for youth with IDD who live in or around Richmond, Virginia. These agencies and organizations offer services to youth before and after high school graduation. Describing the scope of these services will help the project team capture service gaps and areas for further development. Because it is Virginia's capitol, Richmond serves as the base for diverse transition and employment services, supports, and programs that are also available more broadly across the Commonwealth.

Project PEACE, as a first step in mapping community assets for competitive employment, chose to include an overview of employment training and support opportunities ranging from standard to novel approaches. The landscape analysis links readers to additional information about these supports and services. This is not a comprehensive list, but the following agencies and organizations play a central role in transition and employment for people with IDD in Virginia.

2.1. DARS

Virginia's Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services offers a myriad of employment and transition services to Virginians with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The role of vocational rehabilitation services is to help people with disabilities look for, secure, and maintain employment through federally and state funded services offered to youth and adults (VBPD, 2017; VA DARS, n.d.e).

2.1.1. Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)

One of the most comprehensive services available to youth during transition is Pre-ETS offered by DARS. This is the earliest set of services that youth with IDD have access to and they can begin receiving Pre-ETS at age 14 (VA DARS, n.d.a; VA DARS, n.d.c). There are five services that Pre-ETS are required to provide including job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences in an integrated setting in the community, counseling on transition and postsecondary education programs, workplace readiness training, and education in self-advocacy, which may include peer mentoring. In addition to these core five services, other services may be provided if funding allows (VA DARS, n.d.a). In the Richmond area, schools can help connect students to Pre-ETS opportunities provided by groups such as The Choice Group, Business Connections, Career Support Systems, and Goodwill Industries.

2.2. DBHDS

The Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services oversees disability policies in the state of Virginia. For example, they oversee the Employment First policy and Community Services Boards (CSBs) that connect people with IDD, among others, with services and offer additional publicly funded services. DBHDS assures that eligible individuals receive Medicaid reimbursable Long-term Services and supports (LTSS) including Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) so that people can live and participate in their communities. Employment services are one of many services that may be available to people. These services can include combinations of employment assessments, person-centered employment planning, job placement, job development, and job coaching.

2.4. WWRC

The Wilson Workforce Rehabilitation Center (WWRC) works with DARS to provide Pre-ETS to eligible students with disabilities. The WWRC also leads two programs, the Postsecondary Education Rehabilitation Program (PERT) and the Pre-Employment Readiness and Education Program (PREP), both of which help students transition from high school to employment (WWRC, n.d.).

2.5. ***Project SEARCH***

One formal program designed to raise national employment rates for youth with IDD is known as Project SEARCH (Christensen et al., 2015). Created in 1996 at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, Project SEARCH is a Transition-to-Work program that recruits youth across the nation to provide hands-on internship experience during high school. This program model is unique, in that it is business-led and involves partnership between employers, educators, state and federal employment services, and other stakeholders. Youth enrolled in Project SEARCH are offered job skills training, job coaching, and formative feedback from employers and educators (Project SEARCH, 2018).

In Virginia, there are approximately 20 Project SEARCH sites in Virginia, three in the greater Richmond Metro region. The programs are run through coordination with Richmond Public Schools, the VCU RRTC, and DARS and include Bon Secours St. Francis Medical Center in Midlothian, Bon Secours Richmond Health System/St. Mary's Hospital in Richmond and Bon Secours Memorial Regional Medical Center in Mechanicsville, Virginia.

2.6. VCU Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC)

Over nearly 40 years, the VCU RRTC has become a national leader in employment research, advancing knowledge and developing practices to connect people with disabilities to meaningful employment in their communities. The VCU RRTC oversees multiple research and service oriented projects. This CLA primarily focuses on services, resources and technical assistance that falls under the purview of the RRTC.

2.6.1. Center on Transition Innovations (CTI)

The Center on Transition Innovations (CTI) at Virginia Commonwealth University is an organization dedicated to providing evidence-based resources to transition-aged youth with IDD, their families, educators, and other stakeholders (CTI, 2020). Their research is funded through the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and with their research partners, CTI is able to provide free resources for community members on transition topics, resources, and practices to increase competitive integrated employment for youth with IDD (CTI, 2022).

3.6.1.a. Discovering Me!

CTI modified the Discovery process for school-age youth with IDD which utilizes meetings with youth, families, school personnel, and vocational rehabilitation counselors. The series of meetings progresses through person-centered transition assessments and career planning to build customized work-based learning opportunities in the home, school and community. Although CTI has traditionally facilitated the first steps of this process for middle and high school students, schools now have the opportunity of using Discovering Me! by following an implementation guide developed by CTI.

3.6.1.b. Get Ready for Your Career: A Self-Paced Online Course

Get Ready for Your Career is a flexible, self-paced online course designed and implemented by CTI. It is flexible because students can access the course modules independently or with support. Further, teachers, family members or others could also access the course and modify materials to best support specific youth. Completion of the online course should support students in planning necessary steps to be as prepared as possible for employment.

3.6.1.c. ACE-IT in College

ACE-IT (Accessing College Experiences-Individualized Techniques)in College is an inclusive postsecondary education program at Virginia Commonwealth University for students with IDD that do not have a standard high school diploma. As a comprehensive transition program, students have opportunities to receive federal financial assistance, such as Pell Grants and participation in federal work study programs. ACE-IT supports students in participating in inclusive higher education courses and provides job support that facilitates paid campus and community internships. Over 90% of program graduates acquire and sustain paid employment.

3.6.2. Business Connections

Business Connections, a supported employment provider anchored in the VCU RRTC, provides supported employment services for people with severe disabilities, including IDD. Their staff supports DARS eligible people to find employment, train for positions and build the skills, and find long-term success on the job. Business Connections also leads person-centered employment planning and pre-ETS services for youth with disabilities. For employers, they provide a range of services, including support for businesses to reap full benefits of employing people with disabilities while also maintaining an accessible, competitive workplace.

3.7. One Stop Centers

One Stop Centers are workforce centers located throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. They provide people with and without disabilities access to computers, help with resumes and cover letters, assist in job searching, provide job application workshops and career counseling, and other critical services (VBPD, 2017). There are four of these career centers in and around Richmond, including Virginia Center Works- Richmond, Chesterfield, Henrico, and Petersburg.

3.8. Resources for Independent Living

Resources for Independent Living (RIL) services the Greater Richmond Area. RIL falls under the category of Centers for Independent Living (CIL), which are defined as "Non-residential places of action and coalition where people with disabilities develop skills and increase empowerment so that they can live independently in their community" (VA SILC, n.d.). CILs are non-profit organizations funded by federal, state and local governments and are funded through VR services (DARS). There are currently seventeen CILs in Virginia (VA SILC, n.d.).

The agencies, organizations, and research centers in Richmond are considerable assets for improving employment outcomes for people with IDD. It is important that transition-age youth planning and their families are aware of available services and how to access these services. In the next section we turn to a systematic review of reports and other literature that describe employment outcomes and trends as well as barriers and needs.

5. Key Findings from Employment Report and Document Reviews

To conduct this secondary data review and analysis, our team accessed relevant documents through agency and organization websites, several of which are linked above. From these websites, we explored document archives to select reports, policy briefs, and other public documents that pertained to employment or transition for people with disabilities. We also conducted a brief literature review to examine scholarly work that discussed topics including other research projects surrounding employment and transition, existing pre-employment and transition services available nationally, and other empirical work related to improving employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. To collect literature, we first created a list of relevant search terms, then used these terms in Google Scholar as well as databases such as ProQuest, ERIC, Special Ed Connection, and Disability in the Modern World. From there, we screened

titles and abstracts to find peer-reviewed journal articles and gray literature that related to transition and employment.

From our synthesis of the sources described above, we arrived at major themes surrounding barriers and solutions to employment for people with disabilities. When a common suggestion, phenomenon, concern, or need was reported in three or more documents and/or scholarly papers, we considered it to be a major theme. To access the referenced sources in this report and to find more detailed information on trends in transition and employment that supported these major themes, you can find links within the References section.

5.1. Barriers to Employment

From our collection of research reports, state and federal documents, and scholarly literature, we found several barriers to employment for people with disabilities that were consistently reported. First, it is clear that the general public, as well as employment and transition stakeholders often have low expectations for youth with IDD after they graduate high school. Employers, educators, service providers, other professionals, and even family members set low goals for youth's community-based employment (VBPD, 2017).

Another factor that contributes to low rates of employment among youth with IDD is lack of knowledge and fear surrounding what happens to government assistance and waiver program eligibility when a young person becomes employed. Many youth and their families do not want to lose certain benefits, and they fear that getting a job will cause them to lose many of their supports (VBPD, 2017; VBPD, 2020b). Overall, navigating service waivers, VR referrals, and waiting lists is a complicated and lengthy process that many families can not complete on their own. (VBPD, 2020b).

5.2. Recommendations for Improving Employment

Recommendation 1: Better employer outreach

The first takeaway from our data-gathering efforts was the need for more efficacious outreach efforts to local businesses. Novel strategies, such as sharing success stories and narratives of people with disabilities would help transition and employment service providers form authentic relationships with employers (VBPD, 2017).

Additionally, when meeting with business leaders through collaborations or trainings, we need to include adults and youth with disabilities in the conversation (VBPD, 2017). Whether that means having people with IDD lead professional development courses surrounding employment or inviting employers to IEP meetings to speak directly with youth, exposure to people with disabilities in the community is key to successful outreach (VBPD, 2017).

Finally, an actionable step for stakeholders is to build broad awareness about community businesses that successfully hire people with disabilities and uphold values of diversity and inclusion (VBPD, 2017). Practices and strategies of these businesses can serve as a model for other employers to adopt and adapt to their businesses.

Recommendation 2: Educating school transition specialists

Virginia's Department of Education funds the Center on Transition Innovations and Training and Technical Assistance Centers (T/TAC) to train transition specialists and special education professionals in ways to help students explore, prepare, access and transition to employment. Virginia's Council for Exceptional Children Division on Career Development and Transition (VADCDT) also provides additional professional development through conferences and other opportunities. Nonetheless, one significant barrier to successful transition is school transition specialists need more opportunities to gain awareness of available resources and best practices and how to implement them (VBPD, 2020b).

Efforts to educate transition specialists may focus on available work incentive programs, eligibility for different employment services, and eligibility for other benefits once a person becomes employed. These trainings and development courses should also be offered to support coordinators and other professionals working with youth in their transition processes (VBPD, 2020b).

The VBPD (2020b) mentioned, too, that job coaches can be an integral part of transition success, and the best job coaches prioritize matching employment positions with youth's unique interests and skills. Thus, educating job coaches is another solution. Finally, DBHDS reported that Virginia should implement statewide awareness and education programs on Employment First, as many community members may still believe that competitive, integrated employment is not a viable option for people with disabilities (SBBHDServices & DBHDS, 2012).

Recommendation 3: Educating youth with IDD and their families

In connection with educating school transition specialists and other support providers, there is a need in Virginia to educate youth with IDD and their families on existing employment programs, services, and supports for which they are eligible (VBPD, 2017). Often, this information is not easily accessible, as physical resources are located across the state of Virginia, and online resources are scattered across several platforms.

To address this inaccessibility, several steps were suggested. VBPD (2020b) recommends that support coordinators be required to educate youth and their families about the positive impacts that employment can have, and to continually state these benefits at support planning meetings (VBPD, 2020b). DBHDS, for example, monitors the extent to which youth ages 14-17 who are receiving waiver services had discussions about their interest in employment, plans for employment preparation at home and school, and how waiver services can support work readiness skill development. Additionally, the agency measures if adults with IDD receiving waiver services had community employment outcomes in their individualized support plan. These included outcomes that address barriers to employment. Both of measures are born from meaningful employment conversations with case managers and support teams.

Families and youth also need more opportunities to understand misconceptions and truths regarding the impact of employment on benefits (VBPD, 2020b). Work incentives benefits counseling is of great benefit to those in transition and their families. A group of Richmond-based researchers found that people with disabilities that receive work incentives benefits counseling have higher rates of employment and higher hourly wages (Iwanga et al., 2021). DARS and their subcontractors will hold benefits counseling meetings with high school youth, but teachers, transition specialists and others should know how to directly connect interested parties with these benefits counselors but also alternatives where they exist.

Recommendation 4: Collaboration

The last major recommendation concluded from our review of reports and literature is the potential for collaborations between stakeholders to significantly improve knowledge and resource sharing around transition. First, DBHDS acknowledged the need for partnership with the VDOE and school divisions across the state to discuss best practices for discussing transition early in one's educational career (SBBHDServices & DBHDS, 2012). Scholarly research also identified a need for greater collaboration between high school counselors, transition specialists, and other educators, and VR counselors (Frentzel et al., 2021). Together, these individuals can prioritize long-term employment goal setting and combine their expertise of different services and employment opportunities. Relatedly, it is recommended that school divisions would benefit from inviting agency representatives and other

community partners to IEP meetings, as this will allow for greater information and resource sharing, as well as relationship building (CTI, 2017).

The conclusions and recommendations derived from available reports build a certain set of arguments that are consistent with needs identified nationally to improve employment for people with disabilities. However, locating publicly available reports which isolated employment preparation needs for transition age youth with IDD and other key stakeholders in specific communities of interest, such as Richmond, proved challenging. The next section begins to resolve this dilemma by using methods that include community stakeholders. Generating themes, recommendations, and actionable steps from their stories paved the initial steps for planning a community-led transition intervention for Richmond students with the greatest support needs.

6. Community Perspectives

Project PEACE looks to the community for wisdom that is grounded in diverse stakeholders' experiences. Accessing those perspectives allows for the community to describe how they see themselves, including their strengths, assets, challenges and frustrations. The two primary methods we used to reach community expertise were community conversations and photovoice.

6.1. Community Conversations

Community conversations are defined as "an asset-based approach for engaging a cross-section of diverse stakeholders in addressing an issue of importance to their local community" (Carter & Bumble, 2018). Project PEACE hosted two virtual community conversations in year one of the project. This project was granted IRB approval through Virginia Commonwealth University. We invited several transition and employment stakeholders in the Richmond community, including youth with IDD and their family members, employers, agency representatives, service providers, educators, and community leaders to share their experiences and expertise on improving employment outcomes.

Each meeting began with an introduction led by youth with IDD or a family member. One of Project PEACE's core values is amplifying the voices of people with disabilities, and we did so by having them tell their stories of struggle and success surrounding transition and employment. Following the introduction, all participants underwent a consent discussion and consented to participate. Participants then were randomly entered into separate breakout rooms on Zoom, where one to two Project PEACE team members facilitated a 15 to 20 minute discussion in response to two questions related to employment and transition for youth with IDD. Participants could join in on the discussion through speaking, writing in the chat, or by adding notes and thoughts to a group Jamboard.

While discussing thoughts related to these questions, the role of the facilitator was to promote solutions-focused conversations within the small group. After the first small group discussion, we had a transition time where participants were free to take a short break and briefly discuss any interesting points they heard in their first breakout group.

Next, participants were once again randomly placed into a breakout room with one to two facilitators. Each group was presented with another set of questions surrounding employment for youth with IDD, and we allotted another 15 to 20 minutes for discussion. Directly after this second small group discussion, everyone came back to the main room for a whole group "harvest", during which participants and facilitators could reiterate some of the most promising ideas they heard in their small groups. In total, each community conversation session lasted approximately 90 minutes to 2 hours. Sessions were recorded and then transcribed for qualitative analysis. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

For both community conversations sessions, qualitative analysis using Atlas.ti began with two code groups that responses were then coded under: 1) barriers to employment and 2) solutions for employment. From there, dialogue segments, defined as portions of speech that conveyed one uninterrupted message or point, were inductively coded. Emergent codes from the first session included barriers such as lack of resources and poor attitudes and mindsets surrounding employment for people with IDD. Codes falling under solutions to employment included changing attitudes and mindsets, increasing accessibility, supporting educators, supporting employers, supporting youth with IDD, and using technology. Each of these codes were then separated into more specific subcodes. For example, under "supporting educators", subcodes included collaboration, education, and support from employers. Network maps were created for both sessions to illustrate the connections between prominent codes and subcodes (see **Appendices A and B**). The following sections describe questions asked at each session, and major themes found from qualitatively analyzing group discussions.

6.1.1. Community Conversations Session 1

Several groups in our community were represented at our first session, including youth with IDD, providers, transition experts, educators, agency representatives, and employers. At the start of the first community conversations session, all participants heard from a self-advocate who shared her story of navigating transition and employment as a young person with a disability. This presentation served two purposes: a) to share the success story of an individual with a disability with community members and b) to center the voices of youth with IDD in this research project. Then, the larger group broke out into several smaller discussion groups to discuss a series of questions surrounding transition and employment:

1) What can we do as a community to increase employment opportunities for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities?
    a) How can our community work together to make these ideas happen here in Richmond?
2) We know that employment is important for people with IDD and that employers benefit from having employees with IDD. What can we do to encourage more employers in our community to hire people with disabilities?
    a) How can our community work together to make these ideas happen here in Richmond?

Finally, the larger group reconvened to discuss the most promising ideas that participants heard in their breakout rooms.

Theme 1: Education

Perhaps the most salient theme woven throughout the first session was the need for greater education on both transition and employment in our community. Education as a major theme was then conceptualized as education for youth and their families, for employers, and for educators and providers. Several strategies were specifically mentioned in regard to educating these groups of stakeholders, including sharing the narratives of youth with IDD and their transition journeys, peer and employer mentorship, using social media to spread information, and the formation of community partnerships so that individuals from different domains can share expertise.

A common topic mentioned in breakout rooms was the need to raise employment expectations for youth with IDD, so that the entire community understands that competitive, integrated employment should be the first choice offered to those with disabilities. One participant remarked, *"I wonder if there's something that we can do to help promote understanding that everyone should be able to work if they so choose."* and yet another stated,

A lot of people who may see a person with a disability who doesn't have, who may have higher needs or more significant disabilities and automatically assume that they don't have the expectation that that person is gonna be able to have competitive employment.

Education efforts could go a long way toward reducing bias on the part of employers, providers, educators, and even youth and their families.

Finally, another aim of education was to promote asset-based thinking when it comes to employment by emphasizing a person's strengths and skills during the transition and employment process, rather than their disability. A great quote captures this aim by saying, *"I'm big on employ the ability, not the disability...we can all sit here and identify our weaknesses, but really taking the time to identify strengths and what they can offer."* After this first session, the Project PEACE team concluded that for change to occur, we first need to continue the audacious task of changing mindsets and attitudes.

6.1.2. Community Conversations Session 2

The second community conversations session was structured similarly to the first, with two questions posed to participants in breakout rooms followed by a whole group discussion of promising ideas. The questions asked to stakeholders in this session included:

1) Let's start with a celebration. Can you all share the names of Richmond area employers that hire employees with IDD?
    a) What would it take for the broader Richmond community to know and care about IDD employment successes?
2) What does every Richmond school need to assure that all students (with the greatest support needs) participate in paid community employment while in high school?
    a) What could we do to help?

The second session provided some different perspectives from participants, as the voices of a parent of a daughter with IDD and of a transition specialist working in Richmond Public Schools were added to the conversation. Yet again, we saw similar themes of supporting youth and their families, educators, and employers, but new participants and new questions brought great insights to this second session.

Theme 1: Lack of Resources

A large barrier related to a profound lack of resources, whether that be educators, time, transportation, employment and transition services, or funding. The parent of a young adult with IDD noted that even when services and resources exist, there are often limited resources to go around. She states,

And at that, and when [Rachel] finally graduated in 2014 and applied for that program, she did not get accepted because Richmond public schools only had room in project search for six people. And I feel like it should be open to and welcoming of all students who receive special ed services in high school, they could all benefit tremendously from it and help let's get them being tax paying citizens, having a rich and full life as soon as we can. That was so disappointing. I mean, I was, I personally was just crushed about that. I couldn't believe they only had six places in all of Richmond, public schools of, of all the high school students with disabilities. So right there, you know, seems to me like a lack of interest, commitment, funding, whatever it may be on the part of the schools for a program that is proven and you know, is sitting right there and I think could just be expanded.

Theme 2: Changing Attitudes and Mindsets Toward Employment

Related to the theme from session one of changing attitudes and mindsets toward employment for youth with IDD, this quote also touches on the need for school divisions and employers to begin treating transition services as a priority, which some agency representatives and providers recognized as "one of those things…that unfortunately has fallen off the wayside". It was hopeful however, that immediately following the mention of a deficit in a specific resource, participants began to offer promising solutions that almost always included an element of collaboration.

Theme 3: Partnerships

In session 1, partnerships between businesses, school divisions, service providers, youth, and more were offered as a way to educate stakeholders on best transition practices. In session 2, partnerships are offered as a remedy to lack of transportation services, lack of knowledge surrounding transition, lack of internship opportunities due to the pandemic, and so much more. Also, self-advocacy emerged as a method for improving community mindsets and attitudes surrounding employment as well as supporting youth with IDD and their families. Taken together, the preliminary findings from these two community conversations are enlightening in that they specify barriers to employment that exist in Richmond, and they are promising in that they offer novel, actionable solutions to improving transition experiences for youth with IDD.

7.2. Business Insight Questionnaire

Although business partners participated in community conversations, there was an interest to learn more about what employers perceived as barriers to hiring people with disabilities and what training they most wanted to feel comfortable employing people with IDD. Project PEACE partners with the Metropolitan Business League (MBL), a non-profit organization that fosters business development and growth for women and BIPOC owned businesses. Project PEACE participated in three MBL networking events in the summer of 2022 to share more about the project while formally and informally acquiring information about business perspectives when it comes to employing people with IDD.

For formal data collection, Project PEACE developed a short "Business Insights" survey which functioned as a broad needs assessment tool. The MBL recommended keeping the survey as short as possible. They posted a web version of the survey on their website and in two of three business networking events Project PEACE offered opportunities for survey participants to win a gift certificate through their survey participation. The survey asked whether businesses would hire people with IDD, what, if any, barriers they have regarding hiring, and what information they would like to access to increase their readiness to employ people with IDD.

Fifteen entrepreneurs, business owners and employers responded to the survey. They represented businesses that, on average, had 20 employees but ranged from one employee to over 100 employees. The majority of respondents (80%) said that they would hire people with IDD but the most commonly named barrier was that they did not know how to connect with applicants or those supporting applicants. The second biggest barrier for the respondents representing women and minority-owned businesses was that their businesses were new and may have consisted of only a single entrepreneur or another employee and therefore, logistically, at the stage of business development, hiring anyone, including those with disabilities, was a challenge.

Participants also shared their learning interests to better prepare them for employing people with IDD. There were several areas of interest that were chosen by approximately 50% or more of responding employers. These areas included:

- Disability friendly climates/disability inclusion
- Improving accessibility at their business

- Employer financial incentives (e.g., tax incentives)
- Developing internships/apprenticeships for people with IDD

Responses from these brief business insight surveys were not representative of the larger MBL network, but the responses we received appeared to reflect motivation by employers to create more accessible and inclusive workplaces that simultaneously benefits employers and people with disabilities.

7.3. Photovoice

As a final research methodology, we conducted a photovoice research study to add the voices of youth to our landscape analysis. Photovoice is a technique in which stakeholders collect data about a phenomenon by taking pictures or video (i.e., "videovoice") and describing the meaning behind the images. Over the course of several weeks, youth with IDD will meet with PEACE researchers to undergo training on how to tell their story through photographs. Then, participants will share their photos as a group and discuss how their work tells their story of transition and employment. This method will allow Project PEACE to access youth perspectives to contribute to a larger community narrative about employment goals and efforts needed to close any gaps between the desire to work and opportunities to make those desires a reality.

Two specific questions guiding youth's data collection include:

1. What are your hopes and aspirations for employment? What do you see yourself doing after high school?
2. What are some barriers to employment that you have experienced? Is there anyone who helped you overcome these barriers in your transition or employment experiences?

At this point, the Project PEACE team is holding weekly sessions with five young adults from the Richmond community to lead sessions about rights and responsibilities in research, the mechanics of taking photographs, and strategies for telling one's story verbally and through images. This CLA will be updated with results of the photovoice study when data collection and analysis concludes.

8. Where Does Project PEACE Go From Here?

This report represents the first iteration of a Richmond, Virginia community landscape analysis for the purposes describing local strengths, assets, barriers and needs for improving employment outcomes for youth with IDD. An examination of secondary data as well as participatory methods in which members of Richmond's communities directly shared their perspectives on employment were guiding features of this undertaking.

Communities, like the people in them, are ever changing. To reflect changes in the community and additional undertakings by Project PEACE, this CLA will be updated. Future versions will include additional information about employment for youth with IDD that come from photovoice projects and virtual asset mapping.

The purpose of this report is to include the Richmond community in recording local wisdom, but to do so as a means to an end. This report will be used to promote and guide planning and action. A group of committed community leaders representing youth with IDD, family members, employers, school personnel, providers, organizations and agencies will use this information to begin planning for employment interventions that can be introduced with Richmond Public School students with IDD and specifically those with the greatest support needs. Once developed, the plan will be submitted to school partners and revised with their additional feedback. In the 2023-24 school year the plan will be implemented to create real opportunities for youth with IDD to access paid employment in their communities prior to leaving high school.

Employment factors into the identities, health and livelihood of individuals and communities. Communities invest in themselves when choosing to support efforts to employ its citizens, including those that have been traditionally underemployed or unemployed. Project PEACE is certain that employment is possible for everyone when efforts are guided by community expertise.

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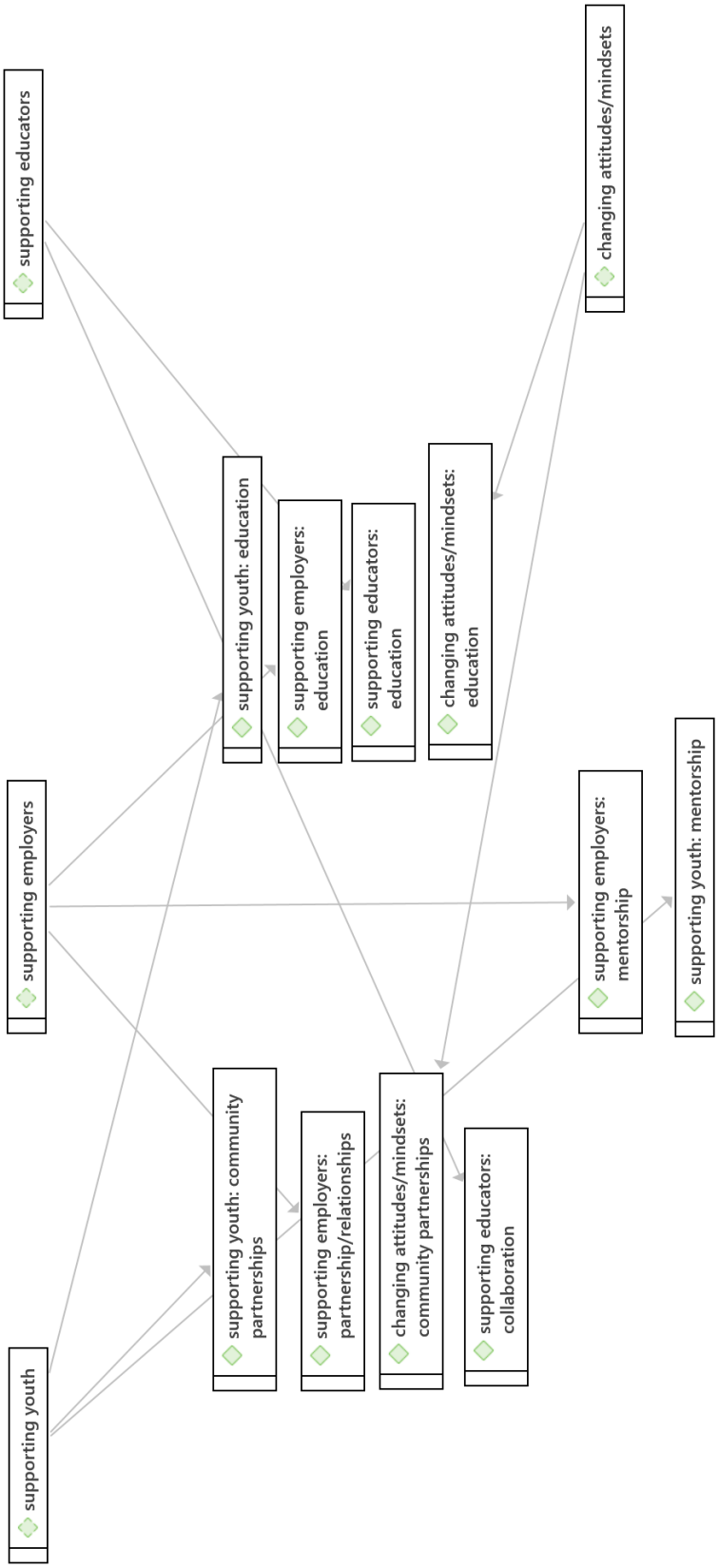
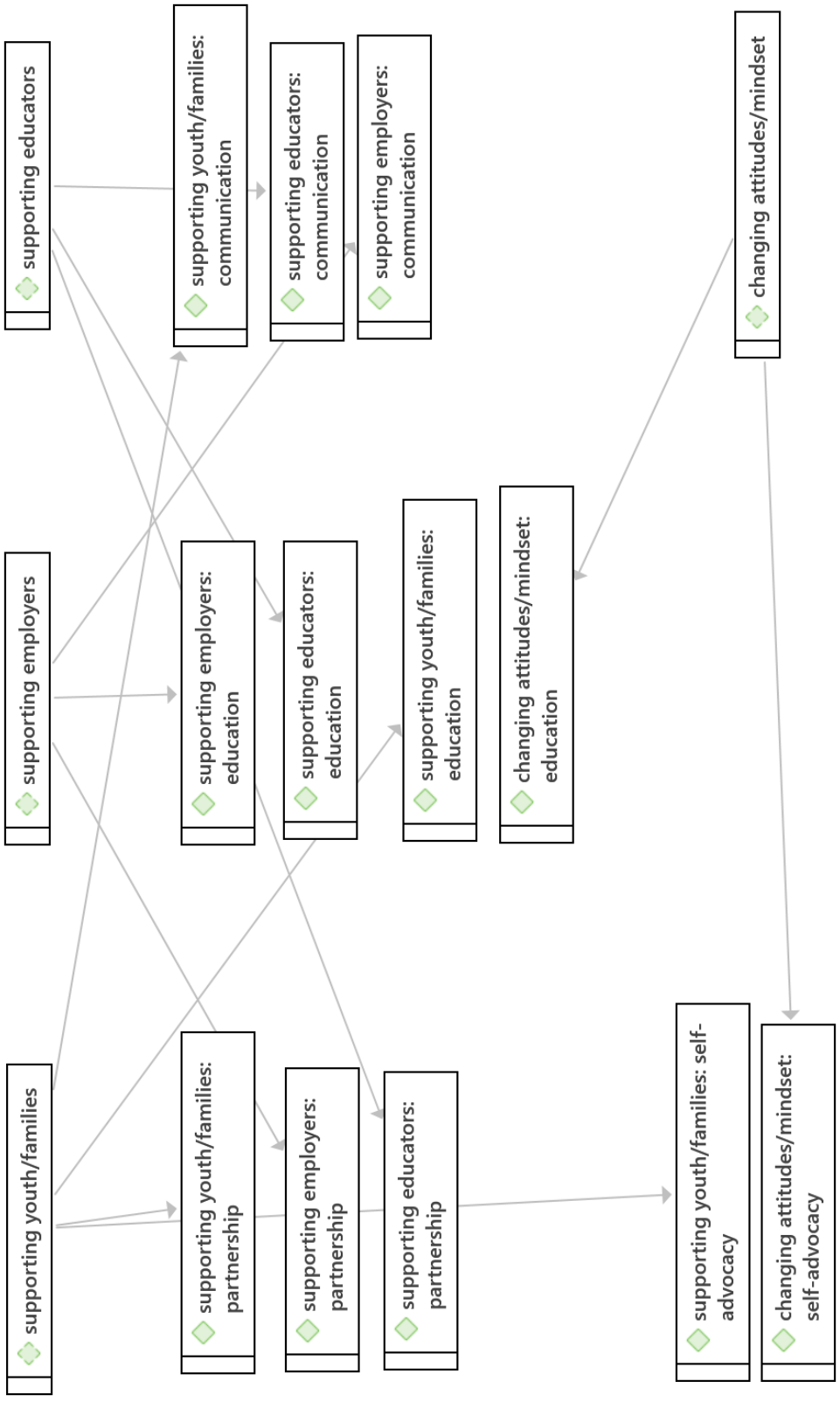
Appendix A

Community Conversations Session 1: Coding Network Diagram



Appendix B

Community Conversations Session 2: Coding Network Diagram



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