



Progressive Employment and Labor Market Outcomes of Transition Age Youth With Disabilities: A Research Brief

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Background

The Transition Work-Based Learning Project. Funded through a 5-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), the Transition Work-Based Learning Project (TWBL) Model Demonstration provides work-based learning (WBL) experiences for transition-age youth with disabilities (YWD) in Maine. Under the project, the Maine Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) implemented and expanded two innovative interventions in the state: the enhanced Jobs for Maine’s Graduates (e-JMG) and Progressive Employment. The American Institutes for Research®, as an independent evaluator, conducted an implementation evaluation and an impact evaluation of the two interventions. This brief summarizes the findings on the implementation and early impacts of Progressive Employment under the TWBL demonstration grant in Maine.

Progressive Employment. Maine DVR implemented Progressive Employment to connect new and existing vocational rehabilitation (VR) clients to WBL experiences. Progressive Employment uses a “dual-customer” approach, in which WBL experiences for the VR client are aligned with addressing employer needs. This approach offers employers a variety of options to participate, so that the program fulfills both clients’ and employers’ needs. Under the TWBL project, Maine DVR implemented Progressive Employment in two cities, Bangor and Augusta. The strategies were delivered by VR counselors and employment specialists, who were trained on the Progressive Employment model and received ongoing technical assistance by Maine DVR and the Institute of Community Inclusion throughout the project. Another fundamental aspect of the Progressive Employment model includes a team approach to enhance the dual-customer strategy. The model includes Jobsville, a series of regional meetings between VR and community rehabilitation staff where possible opportunities for Progressive Employment clients are discussed and labor market intelligence is shared. These meetings focus on

Progressive Employment



Target Population: Under the TWBL demonstration, Progressive Employment was aimed at youth within two years of completing high school who are looking to enter the labor market.



“Everyone is Ready for Something”: This approach seeks to connect clients to opportunities that align with their unique and individualized interests and capacities and engage them in real work settings to build up motivation and early work experience.



Dual-Customer Model: The model uses WBL strategies to meet the needs of job seekers and local businesses. Through active business engagement, it seeks to improve job placement and reduce risk to the employer.

referrals, challenging cases, and successes, and enable VR agencies to determine the best fit for both VR clients and local employers.

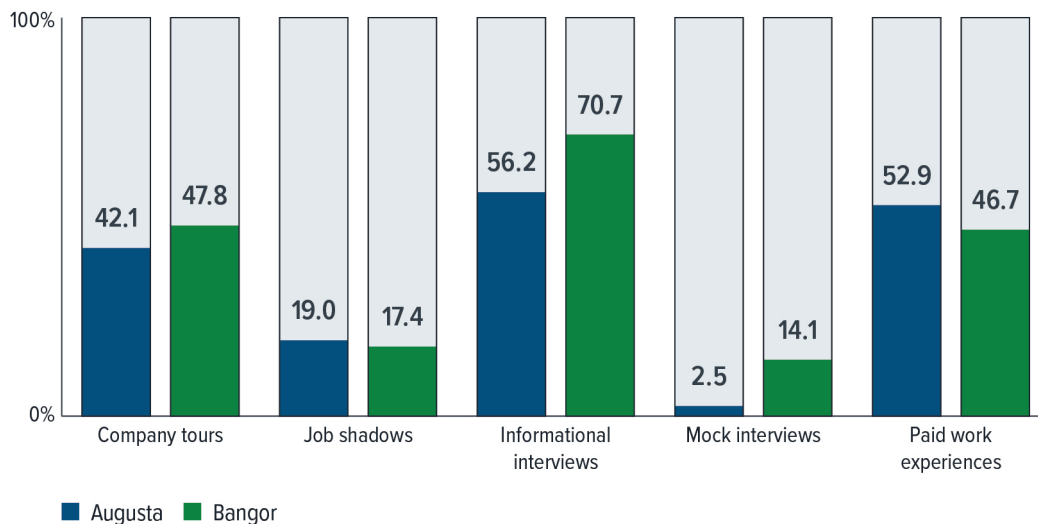


How was Progressive Employment implemented under the TWBL grant?

Progressive Employment Trainings and Jobsville. Over the course of the project, two Progressive Employment trainings took place: one at the beginning of the project in Year 1, and a refresher training delivered virtually in Year 4. Although most VR counselors and employment specialists reported that Progressive Employment trainings were of high quality and useful, slightly more staff in Augusta reported that some trainings were not useful. Biweekly Jobsville meetings were held regularly across the two sites and created a collaborative atmosphere among employment specialists and VR counselors. However, VR counselors and employment specialists in Bangor rated these meetings as having much higher quality and perceived usefulness compared with staff in Augusta.

WBL Services Under Progressive Employment. By June 2021, the project had expanded Progressive Employment services to 355 youth (with 180 in Augusta and 175 in Bangor). Across the two sites, clients in Augusta were more likely to have completed WBL experiences than those in Bangor. Data entered by VR counselors and employment specialists indicated that by June 2021, 121 out of 180 Progressive Employment YWD in Augusta (67%) and 92 out of 175 YWD in Bangor (53%) had at least one recorded WBL activity.¹ Additionally, 131 clients across the two sites had completed at least two WBL activities. Informational interviews and paid work experiences were the most common forms of WBL activity in both Bangor and Augusta, whereas mock interviews and job shadows were the least common (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Progressive Employment Activities by WBL Type



¹ It is likely that a higher number of Progressive Employment clients had completed WBL activities, because of lags in data entered by VR counselors and employment specialists.

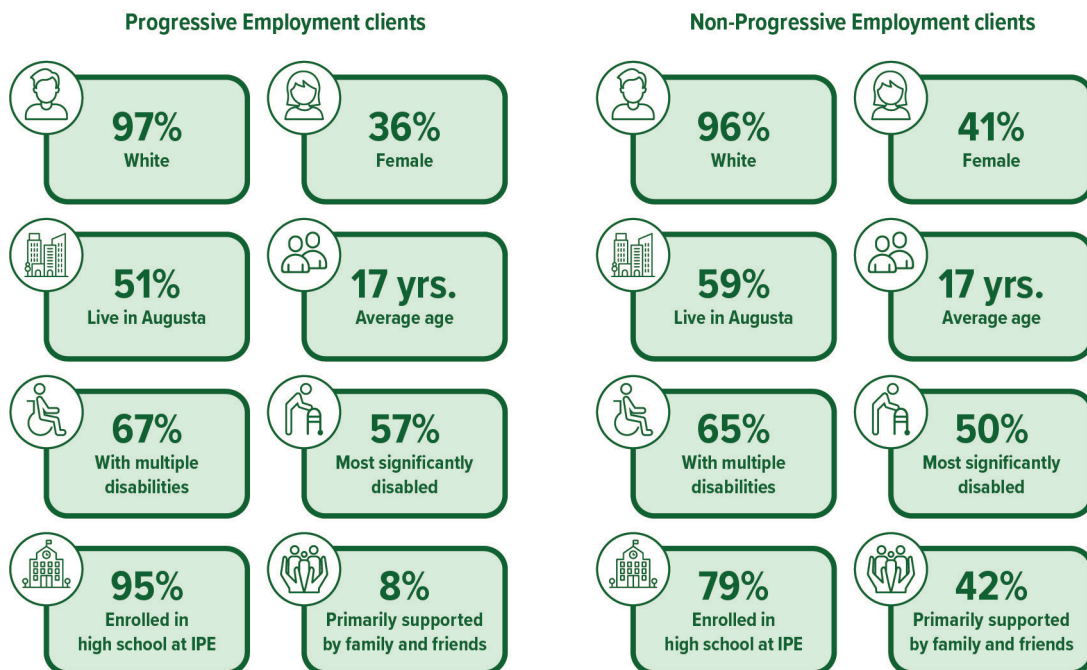


Did Progressive Employment lead to better employment outcomes for YWD?

Impact Evaluation Sample. The study team evaluated the impact of Progressive Employment versus traditional VR services for YWD in Bangor and Augusta. The starting sample included VR applicants between the ages of 14 and 18 years old at the time of VR eligibility, resided in Augusta or Bangor, had an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE, the first step toward receiving VR services), and had at least four quarters elapsed since their IPE (to observe post-IPE employment information). The final analytical sample comprised 932 VR YWD, 180 of whom participated in the Progressive Employment program. The study team used RSA-911 data and unemployment insurance data from the Maine Department of Labor to track employment and earnings of the sample for four quarters after IPE.

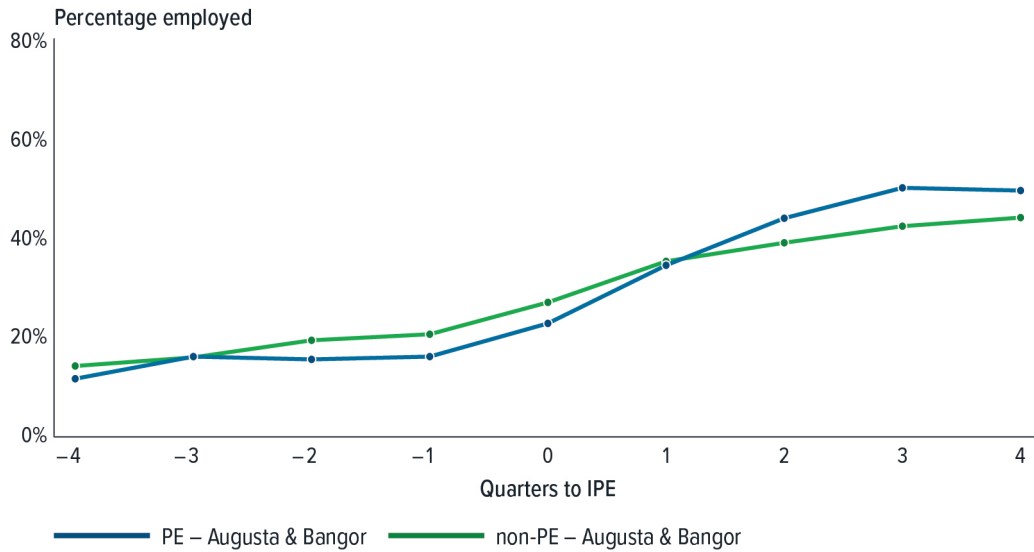
Although Progressive Employment and non-Progressive Employment clients had similar baseline characteristics, Progressive Employment youth were more likely to have multiple disabilities and have the highest order of selection (that is, they had “most significant disability”), and were more likely to be enrolled in high school at the time of VR application. Exhibit 2 shows the main sample characteristics.

Exhibit 2. Summary of Sample Characteristics



Impact of Progressive Employment on Employment. As shown in Exhibit 3, Progressive Employment clients had lower employment rates before developing an IPE compared to non-Progressive Employment clients, but they experienced higher likelihood of employment afterward.

Exhibit 3. Employment Rates Across Progressive Employment and Non-Progressive Employment Clients



To estimate the impact of Progressive Employment, we used a Mahalanobis Distance Matching (MDM) technique to create a comparison group of non-Progressive Employment clients who were most similar to Progressive Employment clients based on a set of observable characteristics, then compared outcomes between the two groups. Formal estimates from the MDM suggest that YWD enrolled in the Progressive Employment program were 10.5 percentage points more likely to be employed in the first year after developing an IPE than non-Progressive Employment clients. The result implies that Progressive Employment had an additional positive impact on the probability of youth being employed compared to traditional VR services. Disaggregating impacts by site suggests that the effects were driven by Bangor clients (Exhibit 4).

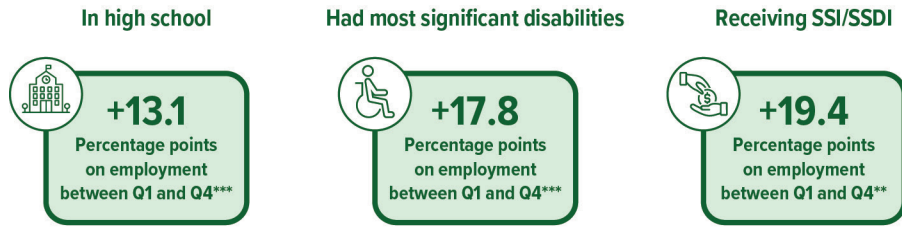
Exhibit 4. Impact of Progressive Employment on Employment Outcomes



*Statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. **Statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.
Q1: First quarter after IPE; Q4: Fourth quarter after IPE

We also examined the differential impact of Progressive Employment across subgroups of youth with disabilities. We found more pronounced effects for youth who were enrolled in high school when becoming eligible for VR, had the highest order of prioritization (had most significant disabilities), and those who were enrolled in SSI and SSDI (Exhibit 5).

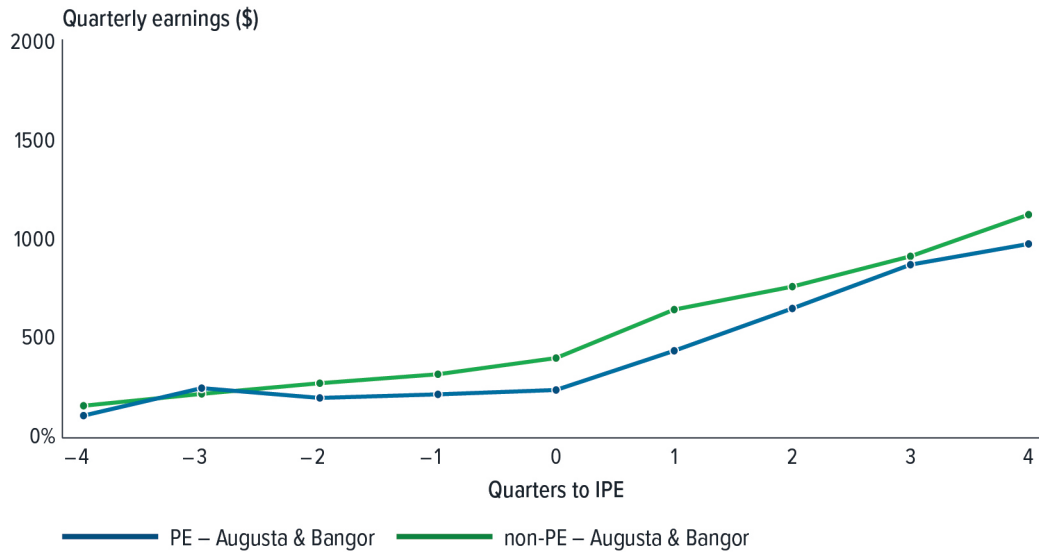
Exhibit 5. Impact of Progressive Employment on Employment Outcomes for Subgroups of Youth With Disabilities



Statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. *Statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.
 Q1: First quarter after IPE; Q4: Fourth quarter after IPE

Impact of Progressive Employment on Quarterly Earnings. The trend in earnings across the two groups depicted in Exhibit 6 shows that non-Progressive Employment youth already had slightly higher earnings than Progressive Employment youth before IPE, which persisted over time. However, using the MDM technique and controlling for background characteristics, the findings suggests that Progressive Employment clients actually had slightly higher quarterly earnings. Although the effect is positive, it is not statistically significant. The results are consistent across the two sites. Put together, the results suggest that although the program increased the probability of being employed, it did not appear to lead to higher paying jobs, most likely because these short-term increases in employment reflect on-the-job training opportunities and paid work experiences.

Exhibit 6. Trend in Quarterly Earnings Across Progressive Employment and Non-Progressive Employment Clients





Conclusions and Moving Forward

The goal of the Progressive Employment model is to connect clients with employment opportunities through active engagement and exposure to WBL experiences rather than an exclusive focus on immediate job placement. Our study finds that Progressive Employment increased YWD employment likelihood within four quarters of starting VR service but had no significant effects on earnings during this period. The effects were concentrated in Bangor, and we did not find a significant impact on employment outcomes in Augusta. Differences in the findings across locations suggest variation in implementation where employment specialists and VR counselors in Augusta reported lower rates of perceived usefulness and quality of Jobsville meetings, which served as the key forum for collaboration across employment specialists and VR counselors. Overall, our findings suggest that the higher benefits observed in Bangor are more likely realized because of higher implementation quality. Based on the findings on the implementation and impact of Progressive Employment, our study suggests that uninterrupted information sharing across key players plays a critical role in identifying opportunities that meet students where they are and are thus aligned with their individualized interests and goals.

More information can be found in:

De Milliano, M., Yin, M., Lin, D., Siwach, G., & Smith, D.-M. (2021). *The Progressive Employment model and labor market outcomes for transition age youth with disabilities*. American Institutes for Research.

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