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To:

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Subject: Inclusive Postsecondary Job Training

Executive Summary:

The network of supports for youth with disabilities (YWD) in Connecticut falls off precipitously after age 22. In the context of the post-COVID economic environment, it is imperative to shepherd high school graduates into the workforce, regardless of their ability status. Connecticut has a program called Level Up that serves students with disabilities between the ages 16 and 22. Level Up bridges high school classes and employment training. However, unlike special education services, which aim to keep students with disabilities with their non-disabled classmates, this program silos youth with disability away from their peers. This report will argue that it is crucial for youth with disabilities to learn with non-disabled people and will suggest avenues for cross-departmental collaboration. This reflects an ongoing shift in state government towards integration and becoming an Employment First agency, which emphasizes that all residents are capable of work.

I. Statement of Purpose and Scope

He is teetering at the edge of a precipice, I think at my brother's twentieth birthday party. *Soon, he will fall off a cliff, and does he even know it?* As a young man with intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder, under Connecticut state law, Kevin is entitled to free and appropriate public education (FAPE) until age 21—as of June 10, 2020, age 22, under the decision *A.R. v. Connecticut State Board of Education* (*Change to Special Education Law in CT*, 2020). However, after that point, he is subject to a multi-year Department of Disability Services (DDS) waiting list or must seek out private, often-expensive assistance. These are things the rest of my family and I know well; it is something we have been preparing for since his diagnosis at age two.

As a white, upper-middle-class family, we can "shop" for the right services for Kevin. Kevin has spent most of his life in one town, growing up with disabled peers and has experienced a wide range of educational and recreational activities, often organized by dedicated families like ours. However, the opportunities you are given should not depend on your ZIP code. Many families are equally dedicated but do not have the luxury of disposable income or a family member not in the workforce to focus their attention on cultivating such experiences.

Kevin has also had the luxury of an early formal diagnosis. He has spent all his school years with support to help him succeed in the classroom, and, since age ten, he has attended all his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, so he has a voice in charting his trajectory. Here is what he has said:

"I had autism when I was little. I want moved up to level one."

"No more special!"

Kevin has made his voice heard loud and clear: He does not want to be siloed from his peers. He wants to collaborate with other adults, doing the things he hears his peers talking about whenever we go out: working, driving, shopping, dating, taking classes—maybe even trying college.

Sounds like any twenty-year-old young man, right? The current conditions in Connecticut, though, make it difficult for young adults like Kevin to be seen as just another person, as the services with the supports to facilitate his success are separated from the services that facilitate the success of neurotypical people.

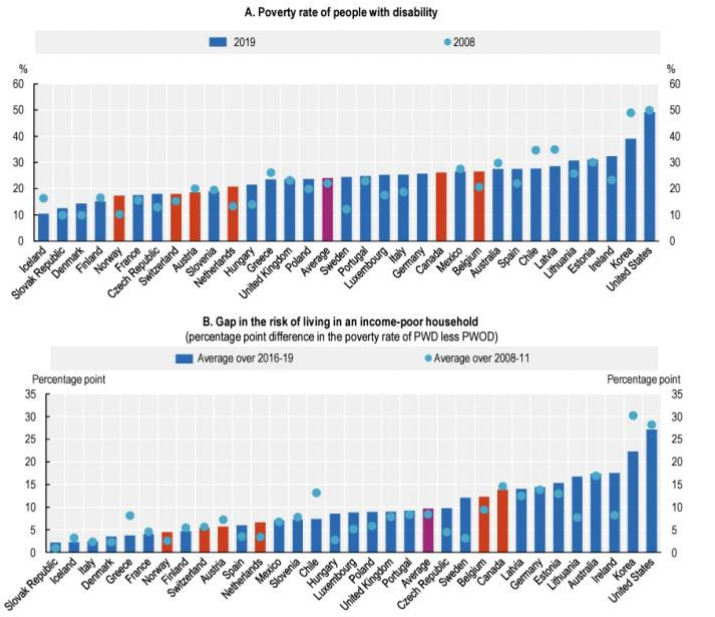
This policy memo will focus on the state of Connecticut, which is beholden not only to the federal laws of the United States of America but its own state laws. Recommendations made in this document may be applicable to other states, though, with some adaptation depending on their areas of most need, unemployed populations and underemployed industries, and the structure of their disability services offices making certain collaborations more or less difficult. Despite my personal experience with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, this policy memo's attention is on neurodevelopmental disorders broadly. As a note on language, I will be using person-first language in alignment with the terminology used by governmental bodies, both in the United States and internationally.

II. Disability and Employment Background

In 2019, pre-pandemic, in the United States, the employment gap between people with disabilities (PWD) and people without disabilities (PWOD) was 39.8% (National Institute on Disability, 2020). This employment gap contributes to the poverty gap of 27% between PWD and PWOD, the largest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2022, 53): a global coalition of developed countries. See the comparison in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 (OECD, 2022, 55)

Share of the population living in an income-poor household and gap in the low-income risk between people with and without disability, average over 2016-19 and 2008-11



PWD: People with disability, PWOD: People without disability.
Note: The data in Panel A show relative income poverty, i.e. the share of people living in a household with an income below 60% of the median income. Household income is equivalised for household composition by dividing by the square root of the size of the household. The data in Panel B show the percentage point difference between households with and without people with disability in the risk to live in a low-income household. The data for 2008-11 refers to: 2013-16 (Canada); 2012-15 (Germany) and 2010 (Mexico). Data for 2016-19 refers to 2016-17 (Australia); 2017-19 (Canada); 2017 (Chile); 2016-18 (Belgium, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, United Kingdom, United States); 2016-17, 2019 (Estonia); 2018-19 (Korea); 2016 (Mexico). The purple bars represent the unweighted average of the countries shown in each panel.
Source: OECD calculations based on the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC, 2008-19) for European countries. The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (HILDA, 2008-17); the Canadian Income Survey (CIS, 2013-19) provided by Employment and Social Development Canada; Chile's: Encuesta de Caracterizacion Socioeconomica Nacional (CASEN, 2016-17); Mexico's Encuesta Nacional de Ingresos y Gastos de los Hogares (ENIGH, 2016); the Korean Labour & Income Panel Study (KLIPS, 2008-18) and the United States Current Population Survey (CPS, 2008-18).

StatLink https://stat.link/cuxiwj

Some might argue that this gap represents a gap in searching for employment, but that is not corroborated by the data: "In 2019, across a large set of OECD countries, people with disability were 2.3 times more likely to be unemployed than people without disability, compared to around 2 times before and soon after the global financial crisis [2008]. This suggests that, compared to 10-15 years ago, more people with disability are seeking employment but cannot find a job [because the number of people with disability did not increase proportionately]" (OECD, 2022, 18). Furthermore, in a country like the United States, where health insurance is tied to employment, unemployed life is not a life of leisure but a life on the razor's edge. In fact, unemployment can create a negative health feedback loop, wherein being unable to afford healthcare means reducing and/or delaying healthcare, which causes health to deteriorate (OECD, 2022, 167).

The COVID-19 pandemic hit all workers, but the impact was not equal. According to a 2021 International Disability Alliance (IDA) survey, 44% of respondents lost all or some of their

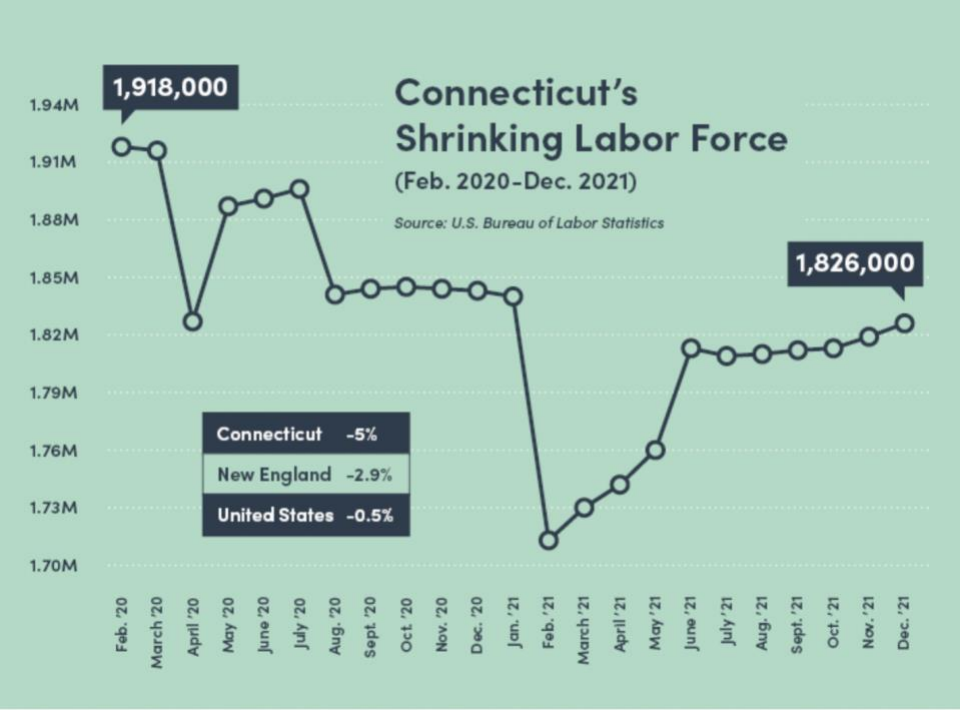
income, with 52% of respondents from the Global South and 62% with intellectual disabilities (OECD, 2022, 3). Even as the pandemic brought innovation in the form of telework, enabling people to work in their homes, where, beyond saving time and money on commuting, workers' personal systems—accommodations, some might call them—were available throughout the workday, which itself became less rigid, telework was not an opportunity for all. Some jobs were considered "essential," unable to be moved online, and so these workers continued under conditions deemed too dangerous for those with "high-skilled" jobs. Furthermore, the pandemic accelerated the pace with which sectors replaced low- and middle-skilled jobs with automation (OECD, 2022, 24). People with disabilities are overrepresented in both camps.

Drilling deeper into those numbers, however, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, employment was inaccessible to a not-insignificant number of able-bodied people: 21.4% of 18- to 64-year-old Americans without disabilities did not have jobs (National Institute on Disability, 2020). What can be done to facilitate post-pandemic recovery for people with disabilities and people without disabilities alike?

III. The Landscape of Connecticut Businesses

Between February 2020, shortly before the March 11, 2020 declaration by the World Health Organization (WHO) of COVID-19 as a pandemic (CDC, 2022), and December 2021, Connecticut's workforce, defined as employed residents and active job seekers, decreased by 92,000 (DiPentima, 2022). See Figure 2 for the timeline.

Figure 2 (DiPentima, 2022)



The shortage of workers did not coincide with a shortage of job openings, as, between December 2020 and December 2021, there were 110,000 job openings. The issue was not just in the private sector. 17% of Connecticut government jobs were unfilled in 2022, the vacancy rate having almost doubled between 2022 and 2020 (Phaneuf, 2022). As Connecticut moves into a "post-pandemic" world, Connecticut employers are prioritizing training and retention (DiPentima, 2022). This is not just something that is said without action either. Connecticut will provide a $15 per hour minimum wage starting on June 1, 2023 (*Minimum Wage by State 2022 and 2023 Changes*): a major component of lobbying efforts for a higher quality of life for minimum-wage workers. This interest in restoring the state workforce goes beyond one legislative move as well: The Governor's Workforce Council was created with representatives from the public and private sector alike to create more coherent pathways to employment from throughout the lifespan (*Governor's Workforce Council*). Connecticut has used federal pandemic relief funds to create training programs like CareerConneCT, priced at $70 million (DiPentima, 2022). The good news is that residents are interested. The bad news is that such programs are *flooded* with interest. CareerConneCT alone has posted that it is evaluating $250 million worth of grant applications.

IV. The Landscape of Connecticut Services

The budget for the Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS) in the 2021 fiscal year was $100 million. 72% of that $100 million derived from federal funding from five entities: the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Labor, as well as the Social Security Administration. The remaining 28% came from three state-level funds: The General Fund, The Workers' Compensation Fund, and The Insurance Fund (State of Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services, 2021, 1). The announcement of the 2021 budget outlined the contours of the budget for the next two years, with a net decrease of $425,637 for 2022 and $218,848 for 2023 (State of Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services, 2021, 1).

Three changes in the 2021 budget stood out as relevant to the enterprise of inclusive postsecondary job training. First, the Personal Services line was decreased as the consolidation of the Department of Administrative Services Human Resources coming into the Department of Aging and Disability Services (State of Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services, 2021, 2). Next, the Rehabilitative Services line saw a $111,192 decrease: a reduction decided upon because of "...the programmatic changes resulting from decreased client referrals to this program by the Workers' Compensation Commission" (State of Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services, 2021, 3). Finally, there was a $300,000 increase in Vocational Rehabilitation for People with Disabilities, 78.7% provided from the federal government with the state required to cover the rest (State of Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services, 2021, 2), perhaps reflecting a national search for workers in underutilized places.

Outside of the Department of Aging and Disability Services, sister agency the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) released its 2022-2027 Five-Year Plan. In that Five-Year Plan, DDS announced its focus on getting its person-centered LifeCourse system into agencies statewide (State of Connecticut Department of Developmental Services, 2022, 17) and continuing Connecticut's leadership in the national disability employment movement, exemplified through the Employment First philosophy, which holds that all people are capable of work and that there is a right-fit job for everyone, including through its membership in the aforementioned Governor's Workforce Council (State of Connecticut Department of Developmental Services, 2022, 17). See a summary of DDS' Five-Year Plan below.

Figure 3 (State of Connecticut Department of Developmental Services, 2022, 22)

DOMAIN	CTLC DEFINITION	DDS 2022-2027 PRIORITIES
Daily Life & Employment	What a person does as part of everyday life–school, employment, volunteering, communication, routines, life skills.	Continue to work toward integrated day/employment opportunities; enhance with assistive technology; promote flexibility; educate community.
Community Living	Where and how someone lives – housing and living options, community access, transportation, home adaptations and modifications.	Ensure correct level of care; promote most effective *and* least restrictive; support innovative solutions for independence, including use of assistive technology; encourage flexibility.
Healthy Living	Managing and accessing health care and staying well – medical, mental health, behavioral health, developmental, wellness and nutrition.	CT tends to score high on general measures of physical health – focus on supporting access to mental/behavioral health services and specialty areas (e.g. diabetes).
Safety & Security	Staying safe and secure – emergencies, well-being, guardianship options, legal rights and issues.	Focus service development on filling gaps in specialty areas; integrate a diversity, equity and inclusion lens to correct systems inequities.
Social & Spirituality	Building friendships and relationships, leisure activities, personal networks, and faith community.	Develop capacity to facilitate networking for various affinity groups; improve communications with all stakeholders.
Advocacy & Engagement	Building valued roles, making choices, setting goals, assuming responsibility and driving how one's own life is lived.	Support work of self-advocates in creating community, peer supports; develop more consistent opportunities to collect feedback from stakeholders.

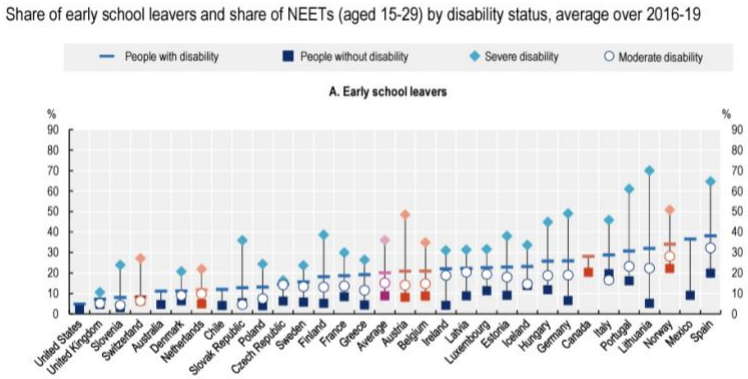
V. Recommendations to the Connecticut State Department of Aging and Disability Services

The transition from free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to the workforce is not only difficult in Connecticut or the United States more broadly but in the world at large: "About 30% of youth with disability and nearly 70% of those with high support requirements are NEETs [not in employment, education or training], compared to only one in eight youth without disability" (OECD, 2022, 13). Not being in employment, education, or training makes subsequent attempts to join the workforce difficult; it is not kind to those with "unexplained" gaps in their resumés. Breaking habits is difficult, and not having a paper trail makes it unlikely that an employer will "take a chance" on a candidate with no prior proof of the needed technical or interpersonal skills to do the work. This confluence of high amount of need with higher

chance of success prompted the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in their report *Disability, Work and Inclusion: Mainstreaming in All Policies and Practices* to make three main recommendations: focusing on early intervention, attacking skills gaps, and addressing youth with disability (OECD, 2022, 16).

The good news is that, in the United States, the state of early intervention is strong. The United States has the smallest percentage of people with disabilities leaving school early in the OECD. Figure 4 is a detailed comparison of the percentage of early school leavers in OECD countries, including both people with disabilities and people without disabilities.

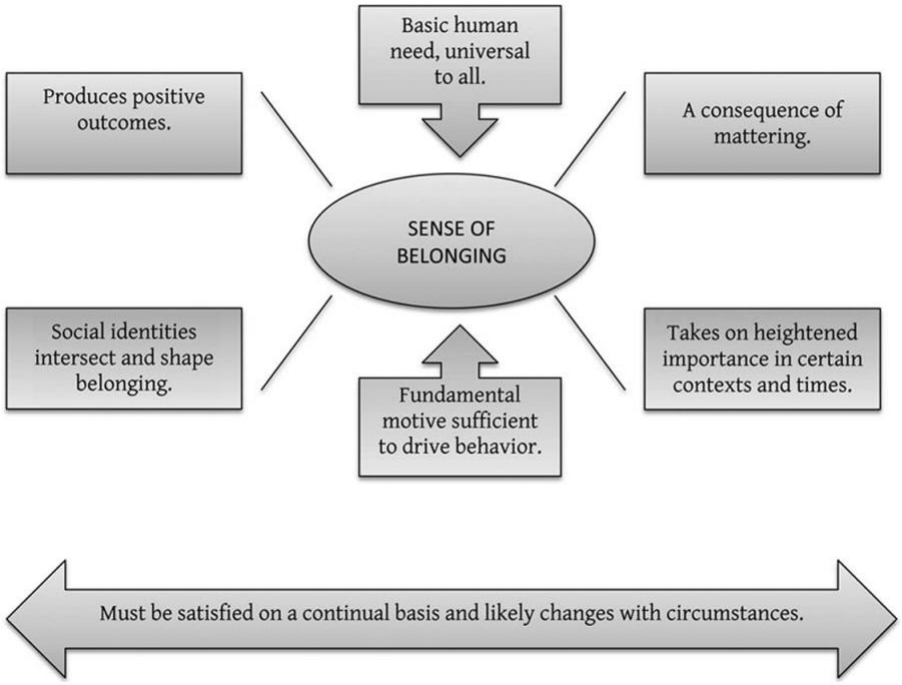
Figure 4 (OECD, 2022, 37)



What this means is that while most Americans with disabilities are not in the workforce, there is a place where most Americans with disabilities are: the K12 school system. That is a site, then, where postsecondary supports can be introduced and embedded to reach most of the target audience.

The desire to "fit in" is a universal human need. That want is enough to motivate behavior, and it is more important for people at a time of transition, as they experience disequilibrium, and for people who feel marginalized. For a visualization of Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering, check Figure 5.

Figure 5 (Strayhorn, 2016, 46)



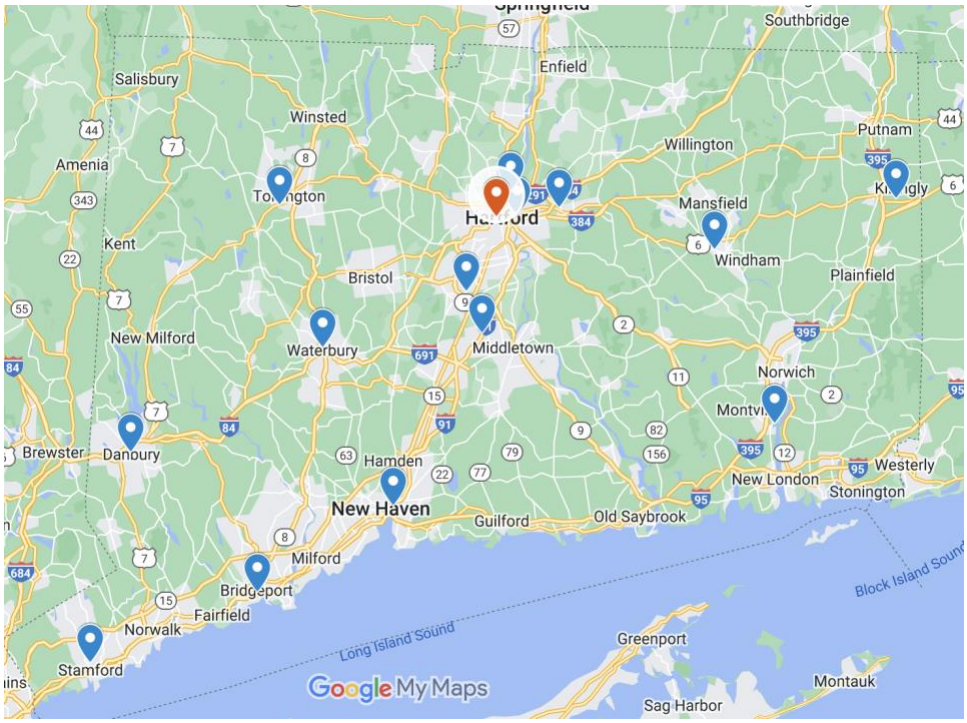
Leaving high school is certainly a time of transition. As free, publicly-provided—but also mandatory—education ends, differences in values and socioeconomic availability comes to the fore as a class scatters to various next steps: from the workforce to the military to myriad colleges. Particularly for people with disabilities who have been in inclusive classrooms, the shift from implicitly doing the same activities as peers to not having an invitation can be jarring.

But the criteria of high-quality learning do not transform when students leave high school buildings. Child development theorist Lev Vygotsky, in his examination of how culture affects learning, coined the term Zone of Proximal Development: "...the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with *more capable peers* [emphasis added]" (Vygotsky, 1978, 86). For Vygotsky, effective learning is not at an "end point" designated by tests but occurs in the space between current knowledge and what one can do with others. Yet when our students with disabilities graduate high school, they are systemically separated from their peers. Even for youth who do not go to college and stay to work in their home communities, they are not in the 18-to-22 programs that seek to train youth with disability to be workers.

It is not all bad news for Connecticut youth with disabilities, though. The youth-focused programs in Connecticut are high-quality. The OECD emphasized the necessity of job coaching, especially in high schools, to shepherd a transition into the working world: “Providing job coaching is the first necessary step to supporting YWD in their transition to the labour market, both to find the opportunities that can be right for the jobseeker but also to support job retention” (OECD, 2022, 101). Hosted within the Connecticut State Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) is Level Up: a program for residents ages 16 to 22 who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan who are in high school or a post-secondary education program. Level Up provides “students with the tools, training and resources to work competitively and forge a path to independence” (*Level Up,* 2023). These are students, then, who A) are not in a state of inactivity and B) have documented disabilities with years of information about their particular needs and skills. Recognizing that youth are still exploring their own values and dreams, Level Up facilitates job exploration through job coaching informed by state trends and laws around wages and certification requirements. It focuses on providing a learning experience rooted in workplace environments, even though it also provides counseling about post-secondary education opportunities. Lastly, the program builds up youths’ self-advocacy skills, which will be needed wherever they go (*Level Up,* 2023).

Availability of these services are not limited to ZIP code, which, in turn, is often tied to socioeconomic status. The Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, while most heavily concentrated in the most populated part of the state, Hartford County, has fifteen locations across Connecticut. Figure 6 is a map of BRS’ locations.

Figure 6 (*Find and Contact Bureau of Rehabilitation Services Offices Nearby You*, 2023)



How Level Up *is* limited in in its ability to act as a source of efficacy information. Other than the aforementioned separation from neurotypical individuals rupturing the flow of information between peers and ability to hone cross-group communication, the existence of a "special" program means that there is a "regular" program. In an ableist society, programs for people with disabilities are seen as easier. Thus, training for people with disabilities can be seen as not "real" training—by participants with disabilities and employers alike. "Expectations that have served self protective functions for years are not quickly discarded. When experience contradicts firmly established expectations of self-efficacy, they may undergo little change if the conditions of performance are such as to lead one to discount the import of the experience" (Bandura, 1977, 200). This sad fact is corroborated by data about employer behavior towards employees with disabilities:

> Employed PWD report receiving lower-quality formal and on-the-job adult learning. They are less optimistic about the usefulness of formal training they receive. PWD across European countries as well as in Canada less often state that their training helped them improve the way they work, to have a more secure job or for prospects of future employment.... The gap is significant, even when taking into account their labour market position. … PWD also express worries about the

> quality of on-the-job training, indicating that they are less supported by their boss in their personal development. PWD state less often that their boss provides useful feedback on their work … or encourages or supports their development … . The gap is large and generally significant, even when taking into account their labour market position. (OECD, 2022, 234-235)

Thus, it is not only the lack of neurotypical peers that hurts these programs but also lack of concerted education of and collaboration with employers that hurts inclusive work programs like Level Up. Fortunately, there are many avenues for rectifying these issues.

First, in an environment of increased centralization of state government, more agencies are collaborating. There are several partnerships that could bring in neurotypical workers who could also use some extra support and securing and maintaining employment.

One avenue to pursue is forging stronger relationships with Connecticut public school systems. Connecticut high schools already have personnel connected to Level Up to refer students with disabilities. Perhaps those high schools could also refer a certain number of students each who are not applying to or have enrolled in college. After all, "...young adults (age 15-29) have the highest unemployment rates among both groups, PWD and PWOD alike" (OECD, 2022, 41), and the COVID-19 pandemic represented disruption and even learning loss among all students. An alternative, similar argument could be made for collaborating with Connecticut public colleges or universities, but those institutions are under less direct management of the state government and thus may be more difficult to work with.

A second plan revolves around including older citizens in job training. The Department of Aging and Disability Services has two parts: service towards older residents and service towards residents with disabilities. As people age, they are more likely to acquire disability, but the similarities between youth with disability and older people do not end there: "The labour market exit rate, i.e. transitions from employment to inactivity, is significantly larger for young and older workers, irrespective of their disability status." (OECD, 2022, 46). Further, digital skills take on a heightened importance for both people with disabilities and older workers. Telework and telehealth can make the world more accessible for people with disabilities, but they are unavailable without the requisite computer skills. "Evidence for the United States shows that older workers with limited skills with workplace computing retire earlier, face pay cuts and

transfer to less intensive jobs with worse career prospects..." (OECD, 2022, 224). If someone is removed from their job—or simply wants to change jobs—digital skills are a necessity. Two-thirds of American job postings are online (OECD, 2022, 224). Zooming into the context of Connecticut in particular, in the fiscal year 2021, "[a]n increase of $270,000 in the Programs for Senior Citizens line reflects a reallocation of existing funding for the Center for Medicare Advocacy (CMP) from the Department of Social Services since the work of CMP more closely aligns with the mission of our department [the Department of Aging and Disability Services]. The CMP assists individuals and their families to obtain fair access to Medicare and necessary care and avoid becoming Medicaid eligible" (State of Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services, 2021, 2). The Department of Aging and Disability Services is taking on a larger role in trying to keep seniors from poverty; providing employment skills seems to be a natural fit for that mission.

A third idea involves tapping into people who are currently in the workforce but want to gain new skills and/or switch industries. The previously discussed ongoing globalization and automation of the worldwide economy do not affect solely people with disabilities. People with "low skills," although most jeopardized by these shifts, are least likely to pursue adult education: They are least likely to be able to afford time off to pursue professional development, as well as least likely to ask about such opportunities—often because they believe they cannot access it anyway. "On average across European OECD countries, only 12% of adults with low skills looked for learning opportunities compared to 36% of adults with high skills, according to the 2016 Adult Education Survey..." (OECD, 2022, 244). Through outreach where they already are, in their places of employment, these employees can learn about opportunities (OECD, 2022, 245). Moreover, *hosting* adult education for current employees and job seekers with disabilities enables both the employees to not "miss work" and for the students to see an actual workplace and gain skills embedded in a relevant context—not to mention talk to people who are doing the very jobs they are curious about. This is relevant because "[w]hen students are provided with a personally relevant context for a new concept, they continue to think about that concept longer than if they learn it without reference to a personally relevant context (Bransford, Sherwood, & Rieser, 1986): giving students ample thoughts to consider when deliberating career decisions with their friends, family, and Level Up Counselor. Through providing training to their current employees, Level Up can provide an incentive for employers to collaborate with them that does

not involve the exchanging of funds. Such a collaboration seems to be particularly interesting to Connecticut employers now, considering that, on the CBIA/Marcum 2021 Survey of Connecticut Businesses, they rated training and retention as the highest priorities (DiPentima, 2022).

There is precedent for a program like this working. In Canada, the Employment and Social Development Department created a new fund: the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities, dedicated to funding inclusive work programs across the country. One of the projects that received money through this fund was Ready, Willing, and Able (RWA): a collaboration between the Canadian Association for Community Living and the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorder Alliance. The program was focused on increasing the number of workers with intellectual disability and autism. "Canada's Employment and Social Development Department created the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities, which funds projects on a national or regional scale. RWA created a mechanism to bridge governmental agencies and private employers by encouraging employers to make hiring commitments for its population through commiting, in turn, to job coaching or short-term training for the new hire. Between 2014 and 2019, over 2,400 people with intellectual disability were hired (OECD, 2022, 97-98). To put that number in context, 2,400 is 22.5% of the total population served by DDS in the whole state of Connecticut as of June 30, 2021—10,671—and (State of Connecticut Department of Developmental Services, 2022, 7) and 231% of those being served by DDS-operated programs and those self-directing their services combined—124 and 912, respectively (State of Connecticut Department of Developmental Services, 2022, 7).

VI. Addressing Objections

Why Not College?

The research about the economic benefit of college graduation is clear: "Over a lifetime, the earnings of an associate's degree recipient are roughly $170,000 higher than those of a high school graduate, while the earnings of a bachelor's degree holder are $570,000 more than those of a high school graduate" (Greenstone et al., 2016, 16). This money is what makes upwards mobility possible—and the next generation more likely to continue to move upwards. It is not just higher salaries that a college degree opens up either. As mentioned before, in the United

States, health insurance access is not universal and is instead tied to employment—but not all jobs. Only "good jobs" get health insurance, and these "good jobs," paying often monthly salaries instead of hourly wages, are increasingly gated behind higher education. Two out of three "good jobs," those that pay enough to sustain a nuclear family, require some kind of training from beyond high school, and more than half require at least a Bachelor's degree (Fischer, 2019). Not every person wants to get married or raise children, but even for those who remain single for their whole lives, a family-sustaining income can be what is required to be a disability-sustaining income.

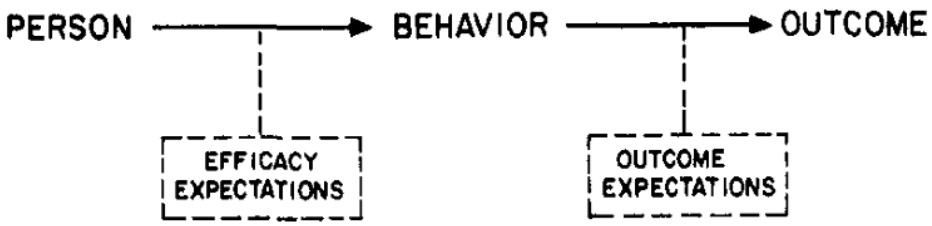
Therein lies the issue, however. The benefit of college *graduation* is clear. College attendance does not equal college graduation. 40% of college students do not graduate. Not graduating means more than not getting a degree. Leaving without a degree is akin, in the labor market's eyes, to never having gone to college—maybe even proof of lack of persistence. In other words, going to college but not getting a degree incurs all the economic drawbacks of college without any of its advantages. The effect is that not graduating leaves someone worse off than if they have never gone financially: "Dropouts are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as college grads, and they are four times more likely to default on student loans, thus wrecking their credit and shrinking their career options" (Strauss, 2022). This college debt burden is not alleviated by programs built to facilitate low-income students.

> When it [the Pell Grant] was enacted, it covered nearly 80 percent of the cost of attending a four-year public college. Now it covers barely 30 percent. It's not that Congress hasn't increased federal spending for the Pell Grant — it has. But tuition costs have risen faster. … Since the late 1980s, tuition increases have outpaced growth in family incomes. The burden of rising tuition can be especially onerous for low-income families. The average undergraduate from the bottom quintile of income must find a way to finance an amount equivalent to 157 percent of his or her family income to pay for college... (Fischer, 2019)

Beyond the financial effect of not graduating, not graduating can be traumatic: proof that the person is not "college-material" or evidence that they are a "failure" broadly. This self-concept does not just invisibly affect one's thoughts. These efficacy expectations invisibly affect how people view their behavior, which in turn feeds into outcome expectations: how people view

the results their behavior will have. For a visualization of efficacy expectations and outcome expectations, refer to Figure 7.

Figure 7 (Bandura, 1977, 193)



Put simply, one failure, especially one in such a high-stakes, moralized environment like college, can set off a negative feedback loop. The good news is that the inverse—one success can kickstart a long-standing belief in one's ability to succeed—is also true. Hosting such an experience of success outside of a classroom setting is not only a way to facilitate connections between the material and students' goals, regardless of their ambitions of post-secondary education, but a richer ground to cultivate soft skills and a space that can be less traumatic for people with disabilities and others who experienced difficulty or even discrimination and abuse in classroom spaces (OECD, 2022, 247).

The even better news is that creating a belief in one's ability to succeed in college, should graduates of Level Up wish to pursue it, does not need to occur in a college setting: "...improvements in behavioral functioning transfer not only to similar situations but to activities that are substantially different from those on which the treatment was focused" (Bandura, 1977, 195). There is no reason, in other words, that participation in the new Level Up program and college matriculation—and graduation—are mutually exclusive. In fact, having an experience of success in Level Up may improve outcomes in college. Moreover, the "traditional" college, a residential four-year program, is not the only form of higher education. There is a growing ecosystem of and receptiveness towards shorter-term certification programs, including online offerings like SkillUp CT, which provides free courses to Connecticut residents in over 100 industry-approved certifications (In Demand Training).

How Will This Affect My Loved One?

For families of people with disabilities, it can be frightening to send their loved one to be with people without disabilities. Even if those people are kind, it can be disheartening to compare oneself to a classmate and come up short. This intuitive knowledge is corroborated by developmental research into the effect of vicarious experience: “Among the especially informative elements are the models' characteristics (e.g., adeptness, perseverance, age, expertness), the similarity between models and observers, the *similarity between models and observers* [emphasis added], the difficulty of the performance tasks, the situational arrangements under which the modeled achievements occur, and the diversity of modeled attainments” (Bandura, 1977, 202).

However, inclusive education is not a vicarious experience. Inclusive education is when all students are under the leadership of a caring, attentive teacher, and all students are working towards a common goal. “In a study in Canada, SEN students in mainstream schools performed better in friendship, loneliness, depression, self-esteem and overall social skills than their peers in special education.... [An] excess of special support in special schools (separated from mainstream schools) could increase stigma and harm future improvement; while the effect of inclusion and students without SEN seems to be neutral, if not positive....” (OECD, 2022, 90-91). It is unrealistic to say that bullying is impossible or that moments of discouragement will never occur, but it is equally unrealistic to declare that interactions with adults with disabilities have no benefit, especially adults in positions that a person with disability wants to one day occupy. The American labor market is not an arena of perfect competition; it has an “...outsized role for social connections...” (Baum & McPherson, 2022, 13).

From the perspective of participants without disabilities, the benefits of interactions with participants with disabilities may be even less clear, but a learning environment based around inclusivity is a better learning environment for all. The tenets of disability inclusion are based around individualized supports, but all people can benefit from instructors knowing them and their goals personally, and needing extra support at certain times, like in times of transition or where “personal life” gets busy or a family tragedy occurs, are not contingent on disability. “Individualised, targeted approaches are key but they are key for everyone who needs support; mainstreaming and individualised targeting must therefore go hand in hand” (OECD, 2022, 16).

Furthermore, peers with disabilities are themselves fonts of knowledge. The experience of fighting for accommodations and services generates navigational capital: "...skills of maneuvering through social institutions ... that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events, but also to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning" (Yosso, 2005, 80). In community, participants can build up aspirational capital to "...hold onto hope in the face of structured inequality..." (Yosso, 2005, 77) and resist systems that create inequality. These types of connections are needed to create an enriching, inclusive Connecticut for all.

Why Not Make A New Program?

Bad experiences with a program can leave a cognitive stain on them. However, from a logistical standpoint, it is more effective to expand a pre-existing program, which is already known to stakeholders, than to create a new one from the ground up. We need not recreate the wheel. There are many free resources available about Universal Design, including the Job Accommodation Network, funded from the U.S. Department of Labor, which provides information about workplace accommodations, assistive technology, and more for all stakeholders: people with disabilities, employers, medical professionals, union representatives, and more (OECD, 2022, 200).

How Will This Affect Local Businesses?

Worker training and retention is a professed priority of Connecticut businesses (DiPentima, 2022). Similarly, the biggest concerns of American human resources staff are: "a lack of qualified applicants (51%), lack of relevant experience (36%) and a lack of requisite skills and training (30%)…" (OECD, 2022, 227). An expanded Level Up program addresses both the onboarding and maintenance of workers. For businesses that already have employees with disabilities, having employees with disabilities is not the same thing as *keeping* and *supporting* employees with disabilities. It is also relevant to point out that employed people with disabilities are more likely to say that they are overqualified for their jobs, which is bad for individual and bad for business' productivity (OECD, 2022, 236). For businesses that do not

have employees with disabilities, the rates of participation in adult learning are low for all employees: "According to data for European OECD countries, about 18% of all people with disability participate in adult learning, compared with 33% of people without disability" (OECD, 2022, 27). For employers who are worried about bringing on a "lower-quality" person into the business ecosystem, once a person with a disability is employed, there is neither a training participation gap versus people without disabilities nor a statistically-significant difference in job-to-job transition outcomes (OECD, 2022, 27).

There is an argument from the other side, not from businesses reluctant about having employees with disabilities but from those who contend that businesses do not do enough for employees with disabilities: Why don't employers do the training? To that, the question is of each stakeholder's vantage point of the field of the labor market. Employers are experts in their area. They cannot "zoom out" to see the entire labor market and its trends, and especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, they have a limited capacity, time- and money-wise to invest in high-quality, accessible training (OECD, 2022, 222). Moreover, delivering training in *collaboration* with state entities signals that accessibility and inclusivity is not just one employer's responsibility—or the responsibility of employers in general—but *everyone's* duty.

VII. Conclusion

Revamping the Level Up program to include a population without disabilities will help facilitate relationship-building and knowledge-sharing across groups. For youth with disability, this strong start will help maintain a lifetime of contribution, participation, and self-improvement. For the population without disability, this opportunity will address inequities in access to adult learning and professional development.

As a person born and raised in Connecticut, I want to spend my life in this state, but I cannot do that if there are not employment opportunities for my whole family. By implementing these recommendations, Connecticut can grow its economy and be a leader in inclusive employment.

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