

GRANT PROFILE

COMMUNITIES OF FOCUS

LifePath Systems is implementing their Community Collaborations for Employment (CCE) grant in Collin County, Texas. Their population of focus is youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD), including racially marginalized communities and families who speak limited English. The Texas CCE team is piloting grant activities with the Plano Independent School District, with the opportunity for the Texas CCE team to expand and tailor work to other school districts in the county, with a particular focus on rural communities.

GRANT RECIPIENT

LifePath Systems

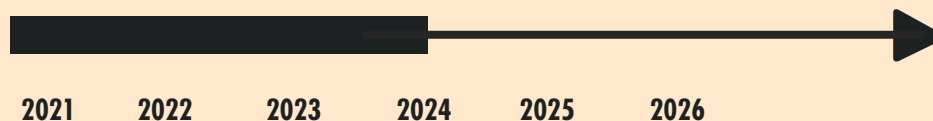
PROJECT TITLE

Building My Future: A Community Collaboration for Youth Transition Employment

ABOUT THE CCE GRANTS

Among transition age youth with disabilities, employment is associated with improved health outcomes, increased quality of life, greater opportunities for socialization and relationship development, and a greater sense of belonging.¹ Yet, many students and youth with disabilities do not have the same opportunities as their peers without disabilities to pursue higher education, training, and careers. To address these disparities, the Administration for Community Living (ACL) issued CCE grants to increase and enhance collaborations across existing local systems in one or more communities. CCE grants aim to maximize a seamless experience and outcome of youth with ID/DD as they transition between school and post-secondary education or competitive integrated employment (CIE) in the community. ACL awarded seven five-year CCE grants starting September 30, 2021, and ending September 29, 2026, through its [Projects of National Significance program](#). This mid-term report summarizes grant activity through February 2024.

CCE Mid-Term Report and Grant Timeline



¹ Castruita Rios, Y., Park, S., Chen, X., & Tansey, T. N. (2023). Collaborations to Support Employment Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities. *Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.52017/001c.72655>



TEXAS CCE PILOTS/COMMUNITIES (as of December 2023)

Community Name	Plano Independent School District, Collin County
Estimated Total Population²	Estimated total population for the school district is 49,241 students

OBJECTIVES AND FRAMEWORKS

The objectives of the *Building My Future: A Community Collaboration for Youth Transition Employment* project are to:

1. Establish a Community Collaboration Pilot Group by December 30, 2021;
2. Complete a community landscape analysis by March 30, 2022;
3. Develop a Community Collaboration Employment Transition Plan by September 29, 2022;
4. Implement the Community Collaboration Employment Transition Plan by September 30, 2022; and
5. Evaluate the progress and overall impact of the Community Collaboration Pilot and Employment Transition Plan throughout the entire project period from September 30, 2021, through September 29, 2026.

To guide their project work, the Texas CCE grant leverages the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth [Guideposts for Success](#), a guiding resource for ensuring all youth, including youth with disabilities, are able to transition to adulthood successfully. In addition, the Oregon Employment First Seamless Transition Model serves as a real world model of the application of the Guideposts for Success on meeting the needs and improving transition outcomes.

² As reported by the Texas CCE Team.



STATE AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Variations in youth transition outcomes occur, in part, due to varying demographic, economic, political, and historical factors in each state. The following factors provide valuable context for the external conditions in which the Texas CCE team implements their grant.

Collin County is experiencing rapid growth, particularly in the more rural areas located in the northern part of the county, with the local schools serving more students each year. This further stretches limited existing transition services in public schools, to accommodate this population increase. As in many rural areas, transportation options in more rural areas of the county also pose barriers to accessing employment options.

Of the nearly 50,000 students within Plano Independent School District, approximately one-third are considered economically disadvantaged, and approximately one-fifth are bilingual or receive English as a Second Language education. Finally, the Texas CCE grant team noted the impact of the Rehabilitation Services Administration's notice of interpretation related to pre-employment transition services. As a result, individuals can no longer access hands-on work experience without going through full eligibility for Vocational Rehabilitation, which impacts the length of time it may take for students to access work experience services.

GRANT ACTIVITIES BY STAGE



COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVE PILOT

Each CCE grant established a community collaborative pilot – a broad range of diverse community partners involved in all aspects of the grant and representing stakeholders across developmental disabilities, education, advocacy, and employment settings.

Community Collaborative Structure

The Texas CCE grant's community collaborative includes a full collaborative with all of their project partners and workgroups for specific focus areas.

▶ Full Collaborative

The Texas CCE team conducts monthly virtual community collaborative meetings with all of their partners. These meetings assist the team with developing and reaching goals and objectives.



► Workgroups

The Texas CCE Team conducts smaller workgroup meetings to facilitate discussions and quicker decision-making than is feasible within full collaborative meetings. One workgroup, the evaluation workgroup, consists of five representatives from three community partner agencies. A second planned workgroup will include three to five representatives who will explore hosting a reverse job fair as part of transition plan activities.

Community Collaborative Members, Roles, and Diversity

The Texas CCE team's community collaborative primarily includes professionals and providers. The team plans to also recruit additional stakeholders, including parents, self-advocates, and employers. Collaborative members participate in a variety of activities, including trainings on relevant topics. Community collaborative members play active roles in all grant activities and important roles in particular with recruiting youth with ID/DD to participate in transition plan activities.

Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

Monthly meetings promote strong collaboration among collaborative members and offer opportunities to hear updates about all grant activities. For example, transition program staff from Plano Independent School District share about their upcoming events. Collaborative members are also instrumental in landscape analysis and transition plan activities. For example, one collaborative member, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, connected the Texas CCE team with individuals she works with who would be a good fit for enrolling in the project to participate in transition plan activities. In addition, many community collaborative members helped the grant team reach out to individuals to complete surveys for the landscape analysis, drawing on their own professional networks.



LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS



Landscape analyses for the CCE grants aim to assess community resources, strengths, needs, and gaps related to providing consistent and seamless services for youth with ID/DD and their families that promote opportunities for CIE, post-secondary education, and independent living.

Landscape Analysis Approach

The Texas CCE team's landscape analysis consists of a series of surveys and focus groups.

▶ Surveys

Between February and April 2022, the Texas CCE team conducted a series of three online surveys for different stakeholder groups: self-advocates and families, transition service providers and special education professionals, and employers. Each survey included questions unique to their intended audience. The survey asked self-advocates and families about their transition experiences and to describe their ideal transition services. Transition service providers and special education professionals answered questions about their transition services and their vision of an ideal transition system. Employers' survey questions focused on their experiences working with youth with ID/DD and hiring practices.

▶ Focus Groups

The Texas CCE team also held focus groups with youth with ID/DD and employment service providers to gather additional details and context. The Texas CCE team held a virtual focus group with employment service providers. The team collaborated with a local community service provider that hosts social activities for youth with ID/DD. The team joined this activity for a group lunch to get to know the students first, and then held one-on-one group discussions throughout the rest of the afternoon.

Landscape Analysis Findings

Key takeaways from the landscape analysis included the need for streamlining communication among stakeholders, improving policy and regulations, and reducing staff turnover. About two-thirds of adolescent and family respondents to the landscape analysis survey reported their overall experience with transition services as excellent or good. They also highlighted opportunities for improvement, such as the lack of communication and coordination among the various entities (e.g., schools and providers) that support students. For example, families express having to repeat information to many different providers or supporters, and it is not always clear what resources are available nor how to access services. Turnover and workforce shortages within schools and providers contribute to greater workload for staff and less time spent with each



student. The landscape analysis findings also emphasized the importance of starting transition planning earlier, which the team plans to address through shifts in their approach to focus more on younger students. Finally, transportation and resource gaps in more rural parts of the county present additional barriers to transition and employment.

Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

The Texas CCE team conducted their landscape analysis with their partners at the University of North Texas (UNT). The UNT team drafted and refined surveys, with particular attention to collecting needed data while avoiding survey fatigue. The anonymous surveys offered respondents the chance to respond candidly but prevented the team from following up to clarify responses. The focus groups, however, did provide an opportunity for the team to discuss student and provider experiences in more detail.

The Texas CCE team completed their landscape analysis activities in spring 2022. The response rate, particularly among employers, was lower than expected and largely included employers already engaged with the team. The Texas CCE team is considering strategies to improve employee engagement and considering the impact of engagement with younger students on employer relationships (i.e., students may not reach employment age and, therefore, engagement with employers during the grant period). After completing their landscape analysis, the team shared a summary of the findings with their community collaborative and they considered the findings as they developed their transition plan and evaluation activities.



TRANSITION PLAN

Transition Plan Development and Implementation

Informed by landscape analysis findings, CCE grant recipients must develop and implement transition plans to address the needs of youth with ID/DD and their families. Each grant recipient develops and implements a unique transition plan approach, tailored to their community or communities' needs, to achieve their intended outcomes.

Transition Plan Development Approach

The Texas CCE team completed their transition plan in September 2022. The Texas CCE team leveraged findings from their landscape analysis and feedback from their community collaborative to develop their transition plan. Community collaborative members provided input on the framework for the transition plan and assisted in identifying existing community resources to reduce overlap and duplication. In the future, the team will consider replicating their model in other school districts.



Transition Plan Characteristics and Activities

The Texas CCE team is implementing transition plan activities, starting with a peer mentoring program, a web-based application (Cognitopia) to facilitate transition planning piloted with eleven youth with ID/DD, a “transition summer camp” for youth, and informational events for families.

▶ Peer Mentoring Program

The Texas CCE team and their partners developed a six-month peer mentoring program, including a curriculum. The team began planning the program in late 2022, launched the program in fall 2023, and held two sessions as of January 2024. The program currently has three peer mentors, who are individuals with disabilities from a variety of different backgrounds who have previous transition experience. Mentees will have opportunities to learn about transition, CIE, and post-secondary education and learn from the peer mentors as they explore their own trajectories.

▶ Cognitopia Enrollment and Programming

The Texas CCE team enrolled eleven youth with ID/DD who are currently students in Plano Independent School District. Enrolled youth use Cognitopia, a web-based application that houses information related to career and post-secondary education and a central communication source for interacting with service providers, educators, and employers. Portfolios include goals, strengths, skills/abilities, work experience, interests, accommodations, and preferences related to employment, post-secondary education, and independent living. Participants can also create a separate employment-focused portfolio within Cognitopia that can serve as a resume. The Texas CCE team meets with each student monthly to assist with filling out and updating their portfolios.

▶ Transition Summer Camp

The Texas CCE team hosted a “transition summer camp” in summer 2023, and six participants attended the summer camp over five days. The camp offered opportunities to explore post-secondary education, independent living skills, and CIE, including hands-on career exploration. Specific activities included a virtual tour of UNT and a trip to downtown Dallas to practice independent living skills, learn about using the public transportation system, and explore local businesses.

The team is also planning additional activities, including a reverse job fair to promote work experience and employment, partnering with the local Center for Independent Living to identify resources and activities to support independent living skills. The reverse job fair will provide an opportunity for enrolled participants to present their portfolios to employers with the goal of obtaining paid work experience over the summer. Future transition plan activities will include events for families, such as post-secondary education informational sessions held in the evenings at local schools.



Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

As with any grant engaging youth and families, competing time priorities and personal circumstances may impact participation. Once the school year started in Fall 2023, the Texas CCE team adapted to this challenge by scheduling meetings with enrolled youth during the school day. Collaborating with teachers to coordinate and schedule this time has helped the team mitigate these challenges and continue actively engaging with youth. The Texas CCE team also created a newsletter to streamline communication with families to keep them informed about the project throughout the year. The Texas CCE team is excited for the ability to work with Cognitopia, as the platform is well suited to address many of the barriers identified by their landscape analysis. The team promoted their project at school district open houses, which offered opportunities to share more about the project with families and to recruit youth to enroll in the project as participants.



Each grant recipient will use process and summative evaluation techniques to analyze the delivery of project activities and determine the project's success in meeting intended outcomes.

Methodology and Approach

The Texas CCE team, with their partners at UNT and Texas A&M University, leverages several internal evaluation approaches. Their evaluation activities include a series of surveys to evaluate project activities, including pre- and post-test surveys to measure participation and increases in knowledge related to each training. The team also conducts an assessment with each youth participant who enrolls in the grant, with follow-up surveys throughout their participation to track growth. The team continues to assess the length and efficiency of their participant surveys, adjusting as needed to ensure they capture robust data while minimizing participant time burden. The Texas CCE team is also considering holding focus groups with stakeholders, such as employers, educators, family members, and participants, to assess the impact of the grant and obtain more qualitative data as the majority of their other data will be quantitative.

Intended Outcomes

The Texas CCE team is tracking progress toward their intended outcomes through surveys. While they have not yet started collecting data related to policy changes, they are fully collecting data toward their other intended outcomes and plan to have data by the end of the grant or after the grant ends.



LOOKING AHEAD

- The Texas CCE team will continue implementing the first cohort of their peer mentoring program.
- The team will continue promoting the use of Cognitopia. For example, two transition staff will host monthly “Cognitopia nights”, where participants can join a game night through the platform.
- The team will host informational events, such as post-secondary education meetings at local schools for families.