

# Evaluation Brief: Breaking Barriers Pilot Program Implementation Findings



## ABOUT THE PILOT

California Senate Bill 866, enacted in 2018, funded the Breaking Barriers in Employment for Young Adults with Autism pilot program. The pilot program was designed to increase the long-term employment opportunities for autistic youth.



**MERISTEM**



TAP | Breaking Barriers in the Workplace



## ABOUT THIS EVALUATION

The California state legislature required an evaluation of the Breaking Barriers Pilot. The Sacramento Employment and Training Agency (SETA) contracted with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to conduct the evaluation of the pilot. Using data collected through interviews, surveys, and a document review, the evaluation describes the implementation of the pilot and employer feedback.

## Key Findings

The Breaking Barriers Pilot accomplished its primary goals: Four training modules were created, and these were completed by 32 employers, exceeding the goal of 24. Approximately 30 autistic young adults helped develop and deliver the training modules. These online training modules are freely available to employers at <https://tapautism.org/>. Employers can view them at their own pace or in sessions facilitated by Meristem staff.

Additional measures of success for the program include the following:

- The young adults who participated in training development and delivery reported that doing so strengthened their communication and public speaking skills, comfort with workplace expectations, organizational and leadership skills, and confidence.
- Eighty percent of employers said the training was “very informative” or “informative.” They particularly valued learning about inclusive recruitment, application, and interview methods.
- The facilitated training offered a substantial value-add because participants were able to engage in discussion about the content and get clarification from the facilitators.
- In follow-up interviews, four of eight employers said they were in the process of making their recruiting, hiring, and onboarding processes more inclusive for autistic people.
- Several employers expressed interest in connecting to an internship program or referral mechanism to facilitate hiring individuals on the autism spectrum.
- Program staff pivoted quickly and successfully from in-person to online training modules due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> These online trainings are freely available to employers and will be a valuable resource well beyond the end of the pilot.

<sup>1</sup> The pandemic prevented in-person trainings beginning in March 2020.

Numerous studies have documented the challenges that autistic individuals face when trying to obtain and retain employment.<sup>2</sup> The California state legislature responded to this issue in 2018 by funding the Breaking Barriers in Employment for Young Adults with Autism pilot program (Breaking Barriers Pilot). The pilot program was designed to increase long-term employment opportunities for autistic youth. The primary goals were to:

- create a training course and manual for employers to learn about recruiting, hiring, and retaining autistic employees;
- conduct training sessions with 24 employers about recruiting, hiring, and retaining autistic employees; and
- engage autistic young adults in the development and delivery of the training to ensure that the content reflects their perspectives and to provide them with opportunities to develop their skills.

The Breaking Barriers Pilot was operated through a partnership between Meristem, the Sacramento Employment and Training Agency, the California Workforce Development Board, and the California Workforce Association. The development team also included autistic young adults. In the early stages of the pilot, a group of young adults came up with a name for the pilot—the Transformative Autism Program (TAP).

The evaluation of the pilot indicates that the partners accomplished their goals. They created four online video training modules that 32 employers completed between August 2020 and March 2021. The pilot also engaged approximately 30 autistic young adults to develop and help deliver the training.

The training was initially planned to be conducted in person in Sacramento and Los Angeles. However, because of the shelter-in-place orders issued in response to the spread of COVID-19, Meristem adapted the training modules to an online format. The modules are freely available to employers online at <https://tapautism.org/>. Employers can view them at their own pace, or they can schedule a time to view them in sessions facilitated by Meristem staff.

The remainder of this brief describes employer experiences during and after the pilot, young adult experiences, and the planned expansion of the pilot.

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<sup>2</sup> Coleman, D. M., & Adams, J. B. (2018). Survey of vocational experiences of adults with autism spectrum disorders, and recommendations on improving their employment. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 49*(1), 67–78.

Hendricks, D. R., & Wehman, P. (2009). Transition from school to adulthood for youth with autism spectrum disorders: Review and recommendations. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 24*(2), 77–88.

Scott, M., Milbourn, B., Falkmer, M., Black, M., Bölte, S., Halladay, A., Lerner, M., Taylor, J. L., & Girdler, S. (2019). Factors impacting employment for people with autism spectrum disorder: A scoping review. *Autism, 23*(4), 869–901.

Roux, A. M., Shattuck, P. T., Cooper, B. P., Anderson, K. A., Wagner, M., & Narendorf, S. C. (2013). Postsecondary employment experiences among young adults with an autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 52*(9), 931–939.

## Employer Participation

Thirty-two employers participated in the training between August 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021, exceeding the goal of training 24 employers. A total of 42 employees completed the training.<sup>3</sup> The employees found the training informative and engaging, and several said they were planning changes or were in the process of making changes to their hiring practices. The main outcomes of the training sessions include the following:

- **A large majority (80 percent) of employees who completed the training exit survey indicated that the training was “very informative” or “informative.”** They reported the most valuable aspect was learning about inclusive recruitment and hiring, including guidance for wording job descriptions and interview tips (e.g., providing an interview schedule in advance).<sup>4</sup>
- **Facilitation added substantial value to the online training format because it prompted discussion among participants about making changes.** During the facilitated sessions, employees also discussed the implications of the suggested changes and were able to get clarification from the facilitators.
- **Employees who were interviewed 1 to 2 months after completing the training indicated their companies were in the process of implementing or were planning to implement changes based on what they had learned.** For example, a respondent explained that their company was starting the process of incorporating the information into their standard operating procedures for recruitment and hiring.
  - Among the eight individuals who participated in follow-up interviews after the training, the four who were in decision-making roles (e.g., president, founder, human resources manager) planned to make changes to their hiring and recruiting processes based on what they had learned. Some had not yet done so because of competing priorities; others were still in the process of implementing changes.
  - The remaining four respondents found the training very informative but were not in a position to comment on planned or actual changes at their organizations.
- **Several employers expressed interest in seeing the training paired with an internship program or referral mechanism where the employer could be connected to qualified job candidates on the autism spectrum.**
- **The employers were mostly located in California.** About 38% percent ( $n=12$ ) were located in Sacramento County and 28 percent ( $n=9$ ) were in Los Angeles County. The remainder were from other counties in California ( $n=7$ ) or from out of state ( $n=3$ ).<sup>5</sup>
- **The employers were from a variety of industries.** The most common industries were healthcare ( $n=5$ ), information systems and technology ( $n=5$ ), and the nonprofit sector ( $n=3$ ).

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<sup>3</sup> To allow time for data analysis, we closed data collection at the employee level on December 31, 2020, yielding a final count of 42 employees from 26 employers that had completed the training since August 2020. However, we still obtained overall counts of employers that had at least one employee complete all four modules of the training between January 1, 2021, and March 31, 2021. An additional six employers completed the training in this period, bringing the total to 32 employers.

<sup>4</sup> The response rate to the survey was 77 percent (24 of 31). While 42 employees participated in the training, 31 had the opportunity to complete an exit survey after each module.

<sup>5</sup> These findings are based on the 32 employers that completed the training between August 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021. One employer is excluded from the location counts because information on its location is unknown.

The remaining 13 were in other industries, such as education or finance. The employers tended to be small, with 20 of 26 employing 50 or fewer employees.<sup>6</sup>

## Young Adult Contributions and Skill Development

Autistic young adults contributed to the development of the TAP manual and facilitation of employer training, as stipulated in legislation. Activities they engaged in included surveying autistic young adults on their experiences with employment, testing strategies for hiring and employment through participation in summer internships, and marketing the program through brand design activities. Through interviews, SPR heard from seven young adults that being part of the development of this program had a beneficial impact on their personal and professional growth. Specifically, all of the young adults interviewed discussed their individual growth in at least two of the following areas:

- professional communication and public speaking;
- professional organization and comfort with workplace expectations;
- supervision of others and development of professional and social bonds in the workplace;
- ability to advocate for their own personal and professional needs; and
- confidence in professional settings and situations.

All respondents also expressed a desire for the program to continue to operate and mature. Many of the youth discussed how they hoped the program would continue to support other young autistic adults in the future.

## Expansion of the Pilot Program

As evidenced by the results of exit surveys as well as young adult and employer interviews, the Breaking Barriers Pilot has accomplished its goals. Moreover, the employers who participated in interviews indicated that the training successfully communicated practices for inclusive recruiting, hiring, and onboarding through the voices of autistic young adults. They also said that many of the recommendations would improve the hiring process for all candidates.

Building on this success—and recognizing employers' interest in connecting with qualified job candidates—Meristem is pursuing grant funding to expand the training model. Specifically, they are pursuing additional funds to pair the training with an internship program so that interested employers can hire autistic individuals.

Meristem will continue to offer the training to employers in both the facilitated and self-paced formats, and they will continue to engage with the business community to make more employers aware of the training opportunity.

1333 Broadway, Suite 310 • Oakland, CA 94612 • Phone: (510) 763-1499 • Fax:  
(510) 763-1599 • [www.spra.com](http://www.spra.com)

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<sup>6</sup> These findings are based on the 26 employers that completed the training between August 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, and completed the intake survey.