



The Council of State Governments  
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## 2010 Innovations Awards Application

Deadline: March 1, 2010

ID # (assigned by CSG): **10-MW-12KS**

**Please provide the following information, adding space as necessary:**

State: Kansas

Assign Program Category (applicant): Human Resources/Education

1. Program Name: Soaring to New Heights  
*Educational Success and Employment for Youth with Disabilities*
2. Administering Agency: This a collaborative effort among four agencies –
  - Unified School District (USD) 259, Wichita
  - Kansas Rehabilitation Services (KRS), the state’s vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency, in the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, Topeka
  - The Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) in the Kansas Health Policy Authority (KHPA), Topeka
  - The Kansas University Center for Research on Learning (KUCRL), Division of Adult Studies, Lawrence
3. Contact Person: Peg Spencer, Administrator for Policy, Planning & Evaluation, KRS
4. Address: Docking State Office Building, 9<sup>th</sup> Floor North  
915 SW Harrison, Topeka, KS 66612
5. Telephone Number: 785-368-8214
6. FAX Number: 785-368-7467
7. E-mail Address: [peg.spencer@srs.ks.gov](mailto:peg.spencer@srs.ks.gov)
8. Web site Address: <http://www.usd259.com/default.htm>  
[www.srskansas.org/rehab](http://www.srskansas.org/rehab)  
<http://workinghealthy.org/>  
<http://das.kucrl.org/>

9. Please provide a two-sentence description of the program.

Integrating an elective high school class with systematic linkages to VR and opportunities for competitive work, this project inspires, prepares and supports youth with disabilities to achieve success as they transition to the adult world of work and independent living. This project develops a concrete sense of efficacy, purpose and hope in the lives of the students who participate.

10. How long has this program been operational (month and year)? Note: the program must be between 9 months and 5 years old on March 1, 2010 to be considered.

Planning began in April 2008, and implementation began in July 2008.

11. Why was the program created? What problem[s] or issue[s] was it designed to address?

The transition from high school to post-secondary education or employment is a challenging step for all students. However, it can be even more complex for students with disabilities who must address their future goals for work and independent living, and coordinate services and supports with a variety of adult service agencies to help them achieve their goals.

*“Where once school provided a centralized source of education, guidance, transportation, and even recreation for students, after leaving school, students need to organize their own lives and needs by navigating their way among an array of adult service providers and federal, state and local programs. This can be a daunting task for which students and their family members need to be prepared.”*

~ Alexa Posny, Ph.D, Assistant Secretary of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education

At the same time they are learning about adult service delivery systems, students must make decisions about whether to pursue vocational training, education leading to specific careers, direct entry into the labor market, and/or independent living. As they move into adult life, youth with disabilities also benefit from having a full understanding of their disabilities, how to advocate for themselves, and a sense of disability heritage/pride. In addition, just as with any other high school students, they need to learn employability skills through real-life work opportunities. Employability skills include being on time, taking direction from supervisors, providing customer service, and getting along with co-workers.

Without effective transition planning, research has shown that students with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed, incarcerated or living in poverty after high school than their non-disabled peers.

- Nationally 70% of youth with disabilities are unemployed two years after leaving high school. Source: Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. (CSAVR).
- More than one in three youths who enter correctional facilities have previously received special education services. Source: CSAVR.
- For youth with disabilities who begin receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI), rather than pursuing employment, there is a lifetime of poverty. The average monthly SSI payment is only \$494 a month, and these students spend an average of 27 years receiving this benefit. Source: Social Security Advisory Board, September 2006

The concept for Soaring to New Heights is based on the premise that early exposure to the workplace will improve employment opportunities for youth by helping them develop work-related skills and make informed decisions about their employment goals. Outcomes can be further improved when such work experiences are integrated into and supported by secondary curriculum.

12. Describe the specific activities and operations of the program in chronological order.

April through June 2008: Planning for the collaborative demonstration project was undertaken by staff from KRS, KHPA, KUCRL and USD 259. Contracts and budgets were established for the first year, with options for renewal for 1.5 years.

July through December 2008: A curriculum development team included staff from KUCRL, curriculum development consultants with expertise in the field of learning disabilities, staff from USD 259, KRS, KHPA, and consultants from the Kansas Youth Empowerment Academy. During this timeframe, the team began designing the scope and sequence of the course, along with specific lesson plans and learning objectives.

Spring semester 2009: The curriculum was pilot tested in three high schools. A total of 23 students participated in the classroom and completed both pre-and post-assessments. A total of 17 students in a control group completed both assessments. (Please note: In this semester and those noted below, additional students participated in the classroom, but may not have completed either the pre- or post-assessment. Therefore, they are not counted for purposes of the demonstration project.)

Summer 2009: A new iteration of the curriculum was developed based on experience from the pilot test, and additional teachers were trained. A total of 14 students had summer jobs. Many students were assisted by the Soaring project in completing applications for the summer youth program through the workforce development center. The skills, resumes and portfolios they developed in the classroom contributed to their success in securing positions in the summer youth program. In fact, one Soaring student was recognized as having the strongest interview during the selection phase of the summer program. He used the professional portfolio he developed in the Soaring class to illustrate his interests, skills and experience. Another Soaring student was recognized by the summer program for being the employee who “most performed above and beyond the call of duty.” Six students participated in the Youth Leadership Forum sponsored by the Kansas Youth Empowerment Academy. Through this program they learned more about personal goal setting, disability rights and heritage, and mentoring.

Fall semester 2009: The curriculum was presented in seven high schools, with 37 students participating in the classroom and 65 in the control group. Some students have received individualized job preparation and vocational assessment services through VR.

Spring semester 2010: The curriculum was presented in seven high schools plus the Sowers Alternative High School. Students attending Sowers either have significant social/emotional needs or are placed through the district's suspension/expulsion hearing process. With the seven high schools plus Sowers, a total of 64 students are currently participating in the classroom and 66 in the control group.

Summer 2010: The next iteration of the curriculum will be developed based on practical classroom experience, student satisfaction, and teacher input. All project partners will collaborate to assist students in obtaining competitive, integrated employment.

Fall semester 2010: The Soaring curriculum will continue to be presented throughout the school district. Data will be collected for ongoing evaluation. In addition, an enhanced curriculum (Soaring Skills) for youth with significant cognitive or developmental disabilities will be piloted. The VR agency will address options for providing more individualized job placement services to assist students in securing competitive, integrated job experiences after school, on weekends or during semester/summer breaks.

Spring semester 2011: The Soaring and Soaring Skills classes will be presented. Data collection will contribute to ongoing evaluation.

Thereafter: Continued implementation in USD 259 and replication to other interested school districts statewide or nationally.

13. Why is the program a new and creative approach or method?

The program is a systems change effort.

- One of its major components is a unique high school curriculum. The curriculum uses the Strategic Instructional Method developed at the University of Kansas. This validated and nationally recognized method uses teacher-modeling and opportunities for students to practice skills in small groups. Therefore, skills are not taught in the abstract; students learn through observation of the teacher as well as through their own practice experiences. This in turn helps them transfer the skills learned to other settings, such as employment. Then, the employment opportunities, such as after-school, weekend or summer jobs, increase the learning by providing additional opportunities to practice skills in the areas of problem-solving, employability, self-advocacy and effective communications.
- Early linkages to VR for competitive, integrated employment opportunities help students gain work skills and try out different types of employment while they are still in high school, rather than waiting to receive such services after they complete or exit high school. These early opportunities help students gain needed work skills and make informed decisions about their adult options for employment and/or additional post-secondary education.
- The Soaring to New Heights project is also supported by a university-based research component to determine effectiveness and opportunities for replication. Pre-classroom and post-classroom assessments look at the students' understanding of their own disabilities, their attitudes toward work, their self-esteem, self-determination, self-efficacy and employment outcomes. Intervention (classroom participation) and control groups are studied. Data will be collected up to two years after students leave high school to determine longitudinal impact.
- The program management team, counselor, teachers and others involved work intentionally to identify systems integration opportunities, where the public school system in Wichita and the state VR agency can "wrap around a student" to create an effective transition system for youth with disabilities.
- Soaring to New Heights is a design-research model, where we began with an innovation (the curriculum coupled with work experience) and then through the course of the demonstration project, we have made additional or progressive innovations. These additional innovations are illustrated by:
  - New iterations of the curriculum based on what we have learned through real classroom experiences.
  - Development of an enhanced curriculum (Soaring Skills) to meet the needs of youth with significant cognitive or developmental disabilities.
  - Changes in long-standing practices of both the VR agency and school district with the intention of more fully integrating transition services and improving outcomes.
  - Greater collaboration between the VR counselor and school district teachers.
  - Greater access to community resources, such as the workforce center, by school district teachers.
  - Benefits counseling information to help students and parents understand work incentives and the impact of earnings on benefits.

14. What were the program's start-up costs? (Provide details about specific purchases for this program, staffing needs and other financial expenditures, as well as existing materials, technology and staff already in place.)

- KHPA budget: \$150,000 per year for 2.5 years related to curriculum development and project evaluation. (Developed with public funds, the curriculum will be made available at no charge to schools interested in replication once the demonstration project is completed. Schools may have some start-up costs, such as teacher training.)
- KRS provided \$65,000 a year for a contract with USD 259 for a Soaring to New Heights teacher and related expenses to facilitate integration into the school's schedule, class options and culture. In addition, KRS assigned a full-time vocational rehabilitation counselor to work on the project, and committed VR case service funds to support employment outcomes for eligible youth.
- USD 259 committed direct and in-kind support for the project totaling about \$45,000 per year.

15. What are the program's annual operational costs?

Following the demonstration project, annual operational costs will be absorbed into the ongoing school system budget for offering elective classes, and into the ongoing VR budget for direct services to eligible students. School districts may have in-service training costs related to teaching the curriculum to their staff.

16. How is the program funded?

As stated in #14, funding for the demonstration project was a collaborative funding effort including dollars from MIG/KHPA funds, KRS/VR, and the USD 259 local school district.

17. Did this program require the passage of legislation, executive order or regulations? If YES, please indicate the citation number.

None required.

18. What equipment, technology and software are used to operate and administer this program?

One unique software program used in the demonstration project is the Kansas Career Pipeline system. This system helps individuals measure their career interests, skills and work values, explore occupations, establish educational strategies, and ultimately connect with Kansas employers who need their talents. It is sponsored by the Kansas Department of Commerce, in partnership with the State Department of Education, Kansas Board of Regents and the Department of Corrections. More information is available at: [www.kansascareerpipeline.org](http://www.kansascareerpipeline.org)

19. To the best of your knowledge, did this program originate in your state? If YES, please indicate the innovator's name, present address, telephone number and e-mail address.

Yes. As this is a collaborative project, the innovators come from all four agencies identified in Question #2.

20. Are you aware of similar programs in other states? If YES, which ones and how does this program differ?

Other states are also investigating methods to improve services and outcomes for transition youth with disabilities. However, we are not aware of any that include such a substantial investment in developing, piloting and evaluating a high school curriculum. For a detailed review of the curriculum's goals, outcomes and lesson sequence/objectives, please visit: <http://das.kucrl.org/soaring/index.shtml>

21. Has the program been fully implemented? If NO, what actions remain to be taken?

No, the curriculum will be offered again through the spring semester 2011 as part of the demonstration project. Post-testing of student outcomes for evaluation will continue until at least December 2011. A curriculum enhancement is under development to create a version of the classroom instruction and objectives for students with the most significant cognitive or developmental disabilities. This enhancement will be pilot tested in the fall semester 2010 and further reviewed in the spring semester 2011. The project team anticipates offering the full Soaring to New Heights package to other school districts in August 2010, with replication then being possible beginning in the fall semester 2011. Methods to gain greater parent involvement will be incorporated into the demonstration project through ongoing consultation with the parent-family center.

22. Briefly evaluate (pro and con) the program's effectiveness in addressing the defined problem[s] or issue[s]. Provide tangible examples.

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of the positive impact of the program is through one of the student participants, Kenneth. In an article for the Wichita Eagle newspaper, Kenneth credited the program with giving

him the confidence and skills to find a job. "...What I've been told my whole life is, 'You're not going to make it, Kenny, because you have these problems,'" he said. "What I've told myself is, 'I'm going to make it.'"

Additional positive examples:

- Students who complete the course as Juniors and participate in part-time or the summer work experience return to school the fall of their senior year much more equipped to begin implementing their post-high school transition plan
- By offering two levels of "Soaring" one at the adapted level and another for the students with more significant cognitive disabilities, this program offers job readiness and self advocacy skills training to almost all students attending this highly urban set of comprehensive high schools.
- Having participated in the control group many students develop a desire to join the treatment group in subsequent semesters so they too can experience this curriculum and support with obtaining a paid work experience.
- Since the students visit many post-high school educational programs and various work places while in the program they are much more deliberate in their selection of post-high school work, or choice for post-high school education or vocational training.
- The students engage in extensive research using a tool called the Kansas Career Pipeline. This program assesses student career interest and skills. It also provides extensive information about the requirements to be qualified in the occupation the student selects to pursue. As a result of this course students are much more clear about their strengths and interests as well as focused on how and where they can capitalize on them relative to their specific trade or post high school educational program.

And one possible "con:"

- Being only in its second year of operation, development of a follow up course to sustain the momentum students have gained through the course and paid work experience has not been completed.

23. How has the program grown and/or changed since its inception?

Like many programs addressing transition for youth with disabilities, Soaring to New Heights began with a strong emphasis on a self-determination model. Now, in addition to self-determination, we are focusing on self-efficacy based on the premise that a student's ability to be self-determined is based to some degree on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy addresses the young person's sense or belief that they have the capacity to learn specific skills and behaviors, and perform them. Thus self-efficacy essentially becomes a pre-cursor to being self-determined. Soaring to New Heights is addressing this issue by helping students perceive themselves as capable learners who can transfer what they learn to other settings, such as the work place.

24. What limitations or obstacles might other states expect to encounter if they attempt to adopt this program?

A strength of this program is the collaborative effort and commitment of all partner agencies. Once the curriculum is ready for replication, state VR agencies and school districts would need to adopt a similar collaborative approach. Given possible staffing or budget restrictions, it may be difficult for VR agencies to assign counseling staff or school districts to allocate teacher time to such an effort. A commitment to teacher training to implement the curriculum effectively would be another important component for entities interested in adopting this program. The partner agencies believe that these challenges, to the extent they may exist, would be greatly outweighed by the increased self-efficacy, self-determination, educational achievement and employment successes to be experienced by youth with disabilities. Thank you for your consideration.

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## 2010 Innovations Awards Application Program Categories and Subcategories

Use these as guidelines to determine the appropriate Program Category for your state's submission and list that program category on page one of this application. Choose only one.

### *Infrastructure and Economic Development*

- Business/Commerce
- Economic Development
- Transportation

### *Government Operations and Technology*

- Administration
- Elections
- Information Systems
- Public Information
- Revenue
- Telecommunications

### *Health & Human Services*

- Aging
- Children & Families
- Health Services
- Housing
- Human Services

### *Human Resources/Education*

- Education
- Labor
- Management
- Personnel
- Training and Development
- Workforce Development

### *Natural Resources*

- Agriculture
- Energy
- Environment
- Environmental Protection
- Natural Resources
- Parks & Recreation
- Water Resources

### *Public Safety/Corrections*

- Corrections
- Courts
- Criminal Justice
- Drugs
- Emergency Management
- Public Safety

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